

## GOING ABROAD TO STUDY

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Many years ago, upon successfully completing our Masters course, my colleagues and I were quite sure that we would not be pursuing further degrees. Alas, the lure of academia was too strong, and I found myself in 2005 considering options to further my studies. It took over a year before I was finally registered as a full-time doctorate student in the United Kingdom. This account relates to my preparation to go abroad, which took considerable time and energy considering I had to make arrangements for the family as well.

The first thing I had to go through was to answer the question: "Am I prepared to go through it?" It was not an easy question to answer, and I consulted senior colleagues, as well as people who had gone through it before, not forgetting my own family members. Once I decided to go ahead, the next step was to identify the area of interest. Generally speaking, this can come from one's previous or current research work, from the desire to study about certain conditions prevalent in one's area or from sheer interest in a particular topic. The beauty of primary care is that it is such a wide area with almost limitless number of potential topics to venture into. One can develop further skills and knowledge in areas such as non-communicable diseases, communication skills, health care utilisation, mental health in the community, as well as issues related to specific groups of the community such as the elderly and the adolescents. For most of us, however, the area to pursue would also have to be of relevance to our sponsors.

Once I had identified a particular area of interest, I started on an Internet search for institutions and research groups that were doing related work. It would also be helpful if you have the opportunity to meet and network with potential supervisors, either at conferences or when they come to Malaysia as examiners. There are various types of training courses depending on one's needs – masters and doctorate programmes as well as research positions. I found another beneficial source of information in postgraduate education fairs. These fairs are usually conducted once or twice a year with representatives from various institutions around the world. These representatives are more than happy to provide visitors with brochures, contact details, and information on the places one is considering. After identifying several places, what I did next was to communicate with the relevant parties I had identified. This was done mostly through electronic mails. It would be useful to update yourself with 'netiquette skills' and

to keep a record of emails sent out. Undoubtedly most people have busy schedules, and in some cases follow-up emails would be necessary. Generally I found my email correspondents friendly and helpful. It allowed me to identify potential supervisors as well as to further streamline my choice of institutions to a manageable amount.

Most institutions, if not all, require some form of language proficiency test, academic background, a research proposal, referee reports and evidence of funding. I was fortunate because by the time I was doing my application process, I had already secured a scholarship. Do take note that different funding agencies would have different requirements and some may even have age limits for applicants. Somewhere in between I found the time to sit for my language proficiency test, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). This written and oral test is conducted many times a year (a source of information is the British Council website <http://www.britishcouncil.org/>) with venues in almost all major towns in Malaysia. Candidates need to pay a fee, and at the time I took the test, results were valid for two years. There are books and audiotapes available in the market to help candidates familiarise themselves with the different English slang used in the exams.

Having settled all that, I was then able to proceed with formal applications. The easiest ones I found were those that allowed electronic application but there were several that required forms and copies of certificates to be posted. It is useful to keep in mind that institutions vary in processing times.

Then there was the whole process of preparing to take my family abroad. This included making sure everyone had a valid passport and visa. Before applying for visa I had to have evidence of accommodation abroad, i.e. getting a signed tenancy agreement. Most universities will have an accommodation office that can help, but I was fortunate to know a Malaysian family who assisted in finding us a house. The visa application procedures may differ according to each country, and you will need to consult the various websites for up-to-date information. Visa processing fees can cost a tidy sum and hence an added strain on the pocket. Some countries may also require a medical examination from pre-selected practitioners before one applies for a visa, so this may lengthen your application process time.

The last few weeks before leaving were certainly busy. I was rightfully advised to bring enough money for it would take some time before I could open a bank account (in retrospect I found this true – it took several weeks before I had an account). Before leaving Malaysia I opened an account with a local bank that had branches in my city of destination. I was glad I did that as I could withdraw money from my Malaysian account through the automatic teller machine for a minimal fee. There is also the option of telegraphic transfer if you need more money from home.

When the time came to leave, I went several weeks ahead of my family, and found that this extra time was useful in setting up our new home and to get started on my work. They joined

me about three weeks after I arrived, and the children were able to start school a week later. As a conclusion, it takes a lot of planning and preparation with moments of ups and downs, not only to secure a place, but also to oversee issues related to bringing a family abroad.

**Note:**

This article was prepared based on the author's own experience. Certain details and requirements may have changed since time of writing. The author declares no conflict of interest and wishes to thank University of Malaya and the Ministry of Higher Education for the scholarship to pursue her studies.



### **50 years ago...**

This study conducted among the freshmen of University of Malaya in Singapore [then a part of Malaya] illustrated a predominant problem of that time admirably: tuberculosis.

***Kadri ZN. Pulmonary tuberculosis in the University of Malaya students. Chest. 1959;36:612-5.***

Between 1953 and 1958, over three thousand chest X-rays were done for 1834 freshmen. The incidence of active pulmonary tuberculosis was found to be 3.15%. This higher incidence of "clinical" tuberculosis was "in keeping with the general morbidity and mortality figures of tuberculosis in the general public." Among students who were originally enrolled as inactive cases, one-quarter of them developed active tuberculosis and required treatment.

<http://www.chestjournal.org/cgi/reprint/36/6/612.pdf>