

MY EXPERIENCE LIVING IN UK



I wish to iterate here of my experience living in the United Kingdom for the students to read. It is a very important phase of life and I hope my story will give some insights for the students in their consideration for overseas studies. My time abroad began with the suggestion of our former UMS Vice-Chancellor Tan Sri Professor Emeritus Datuk Seri Panglima Dr. Abu Hassan Othman. He proposed that staffs of the university should consider pursuing their studies overseas. I took up the challenge. Back then there was no internet to search for potential universities. Unlike today, where universities around the world can be seen through its many websites and photo galleries. At that time, there were only recommendations from the British Council which provided learning opportunities as from the UK. Through them, I chose the University of Hull.

After working as a lecturer for five years (1997-2002), it was time to do my PhD. I had wanted to study poverty and its psychological effects. There were many options available at this time for me to pursue my postgraduate studies. After communicating with a few possible supervisors, I choose the University of Exeter.

GETTING TO EXETER

My family and I arrived in Exeter, UK towards the end of 2002. It was a cold winter when we touched down at Heathrow London International Airport and it will be another four hours journey by road to get to Exeter. Exeter is a countryside town with a hilly landscape. It is also where retirees come to stay away from the hustle and bustle of city life. It is a peaceful and beautiful place and many experiences awaited me and my family here.

SURVIVING IN EXETER

Arriving for a long-term stay with my family was a big challenge. A challenge that I took in my stride. First we needed a roof. My wife and I scouted around for available houses and we found a beautiful place for us four which cost about £500.00 (2003) per month, about £700.00 in today's currency (RM4,000.00). To secure the house, I have no other options but to work part time in order to cover our expenses there.

WORKING IN EXETER

My first job here was working at a supermarket called Macro as cashier. I was here for 4 months. This extra fund was needed to cover the high cost of living. After 4 months at Macro, I found a job at Royal Mail and worked here mostly during my stay in Exeter. On top of that, I worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Exeter University, teaching statistics to second year student. During my free time, I bought second hand computer sold by departing student and sold it back to incoming students.

My routine? My shift at Royal Mail started at 6 pm till 10 pm, four nights a week. After dinner, I worked on my thesis until 2 to 3 am. In the morning, at 8 am, I sent my wife to her office and kids to school. At 3 pm, went to pick my kids from school, rest at home and at 4.30 pm, fetched my wife from her office. Then I put on my Royal Mail uniform and off to work at 6 pm. During my free time, from 9 am to 3 pm, I assisted students in statistics at the university, took a nap if I slept late the night before, play badminton, went to see my supervisor or stayed at the library. It was hard but C'est la vie!

MIXING WITH THE BRITISH PEOPLE

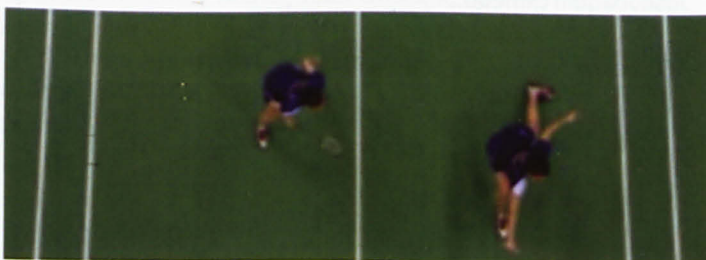
To truly understand how different society lives, one must mix with the locals there. Some overseas students prefer to live with their own kind, thus missing the joy of living in a foreign place. For me, I wanted to try something new, I was in a totally different world, living, working, chatting and bonding with the locals there.

One thing that surprises me is that the locals often remarked on how well we Malaysian converse in English, even better than some of them. On reflection, of course we speak proper English, we were taught classroom English in Malaysia as compared to their everyday English, sort of 'bahasa pasar'. In addition, there were quite a lot of international students who could not speak in English at first and yet, had the courage to stay there and learn the language. So in comparison to those international students, I don't foresee any problem for Malaysian to survive there. After all, we studied English for a large part of our student life, at primary and secondary level.

CAN MALAYSIANS PLAY BADMINTON? ASKED THE BRITONS

As I mentioned before, I played badminton, usually with my Royal Mail colleagues. Words went out that my friend (a fellow Malaysian) and I are good at badminton. It didn't take long for two Britons, in front of all the staffs at Royal Mail to challenge us for a game of badminton in a typical British brash manner. Initially, we rejected the challenge, saying that they are better than us and we only played for fun. Through whispers and chatter, everyone at the factory, even the managers, soon knew about the challenge so we reluctantly accepted their challenge.

Then came the match day, we beat them 15-0, 15-4 and 15-2. The two Britons were shell-shocked. When I went to work that particular night, unknown to me, the most staffs knew about the result and everybody congratulated us. The two Britons became the joke of the week. The British people really like sports and they appreciate winners and enjoy making fun of losers, especially the arrogant ones. After that incident, no one dared to challenge us.



Pn Hayati bt Salleh Baihaki in United Kingdom

PUAN HAYATI BT SALLEH BAIHAKI AND THE CHILDREN

My wife, Pn Hayati bt Salleh Baihaki was there with me through the summers and winters in Exeter. When I was working part-time to provide for my family, my wife also looked for a job to help me with the burden. Only she did it differently. While most Malaysian prefer to work as cleaner, kitchen helper and other menial job, she applied and was recruited into a high-level British office job, the British Audit Commission at the Blenheim Court, Matford Business Park. She was confident and capable, thus it wasn't a surprise that the company offered her a permanent job after six month working as a part timer. She was even given the trust to represent her company in many outstation duties.

My children too absorbed the experience of living in the United Kingdom. I strongly believe in mixing with the British people, so instead of going to the same school where Malaysian normally sent children to, we decided that our son would study in a school with almost no Asians. People there were quite curious of him as they had never seen a Malaysian boy before. This surroundings made him quick to get on his feet, and with no other Malaysians around, he assimilated easily with the Britons.



My son in his classroom in United Kingdom

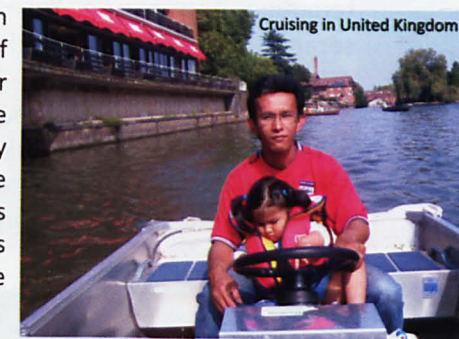


My daughter with her friends in United Kingdom

TEACHING STYLE IN THE UK

Teaching and learning approach in England is quite different that those in Malaysia. I might not be popular by saying this, but based on my observation, some academicians in Malaysian took a particular delight in putting down students' presentation, criticizing students research and I often heard this statement, "I don't understand what are you trying to do" or "what you are doing is wrong". This is a totally out-dated and negative approach, designed to scare the students rather than helping them. At Exeter, the approach is more student-friendly. As for the first statement above, the academicians there normally would first try to understand what the student want to do, then suggest an alternative if the student did something wrong. The rationale behind this is simple. You need to understand where the mistake lies before being able to suggest solution. Being able to give constructive comments and understand where the mistake lies require a higher level of cognitive functioning. This is a culture that we should inculcate among our academic staff.

I learned a lot about student supervision under Prof Webley. The very first thing I learned was that I need to be proactive. During my meetings with him, whenever I came across a problem in my research, I always made a point of suggesting a few solutions. Then we discussed the merits for each of my solution. So I learned how to solve my own problem instead of simply asking him for solution. Thus, his role as a supervisor is only to guide me to the right direction. This is the most precious lesson I learnt while doing my thesis.



Cruising in United Kingdom

BEST DEBATER AWARD

In Exeter, there was a debate competition held in the University of Exeter. Many debaters from countries such as Greece, UK, Turkey and China took part to debate over a title along the lines of 'Leisure VS Money : the secret to Happiness of Life'. Staying true to my principle of willing to participate instead of isolating myself, I took part and challenged these debaters from around the world. I voiced my ideas, responded to their questions and defended against their remarks. When the debate was finished, the Best Debater Award was awarded to me. A Malaysian, amongst people from around the world, debating in English, in the United Kingdom. To my fellow students reading this, what is to be learnt here is participation. Participate and you will be amazed as to what you can achieve.