

**UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA**

**LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH  
STUDENTS: EXPLORING  
LEARNING CHALLENGES AND  
STRATEGIES IN THEIR DOCTORAL  
LEARNING JOURNEY**

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**  
**(Education)**

**Faculty of Education**

**June 2018**

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Teknologi MARA. It is original and is the results of my own work, unless otherwise indicated or acknowledged as referenced work. This thesis has not been submitted to any other academic institution or non-academic institution for any degree or qualification.

I, hereby, acknowledge that I have been supplied with the Academic Rules and Regulations for Post Graduate, Universiti Teknologi MARA, regulating the conduct of my study and research.

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## ABSTRACT

There has been a substantial increase in the number of research students enrolled in public higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Although the increase in number of PhD enrolment seems to support the nation's aspiration to elevate human capital, the high attrition rate amongst PhD students is quite alarming. Various research efforts have been carried out to investigate this phenomenon; however, most of the studies were focused on supervision. Although supervision is an integral part of doctoral learning, it is also important to acknowledge the role of learning strategies in the success in completing students' theses. Research findings have reported that effective use of learning strategies enables learners to take responsibility for their own learning, promotes learner autonomy, and positively relates to students' academic performance. However, little research has systematically examined the learning strategy use of research students and how they carry out their doctoral learning, in which learner autonomy is of paramount importance. Even less is known about the challenges that research students in Malaysia face during their doctoral learning journey and how they cope with these challenges. This study examines the learning challenges that research students experience during their doctoral learning journey and how they overcome the challenges. This qualitative study involved an extensive collection of time- and context-sensitive data and emphasised on giving participants a personal voice. Snowball sampling was used and a total of eight participants were involved in this study. Four stages of data collection generated rich data from lengthy interviews and provided opportunities for re-interviewing the same participants all over again. Three types of interviews were utilised, and necessary steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness was established in this research. Data analyses were executed during the three stages in which the first stage dealt with the data collected from the storytelling. Meanwhile the second stage was concerned with the data of both the storytelling and the stimulated recall interviews; and the last stage carried out comprehensive analyses on the data generated from the three data collection methods. Three broad categories of learning challenges were identified from the findings namely supervision, academic and psychological. Academic challenges were most profound in their learning in which knowledge creation and conceptualization being the most challenging skills whilst psychological issues were the least challenging. The findings of this study suggested that cognitive learning strategies were the most popular choice of learning strategy type used by the participants. The findings had proven that research students' complex cognitive development and their self-regulation skills were displayed because of their successful transition from dependent learners to independent researchers. This study contributes to the literature of the three areas on which it was established. First, it extends the research on learning strategies to the context of doctoral students' learning. This research reveals a range of learning strategies that these successful research students used to extend their learner autonomy. Also, systematic examination of the students' learning strategy uses casts light on the doctoral learning process. Next, this research has introduced a fresh perspective to the literature on doctoral students, which has been dominated by investigation into the supervision process. Lastly, this research provides an in-depth understanding of the learning processes of successful research students studying in Malaysian universities.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*And seek help through patience and prayer, and indeed,  
it is difficult except for the humbly submissive [to Allah]. Quran 2:45*

Nothing of any great worth is accomplished in isolation or alone. It is with the utmost sincerity, humility and modesty that I wish to acknowledge the roles of several people who have seen me through this long, but humbling journey and were instrumental in making my research journey complete.

Deepest appreciation to my supervisors, Professor Dr. Faizah Abd Majid and Associate Professor Dr. Izaham Shah Ismail for your support and guidance throughout this learning journey. You have given me the opportunity to experience different cycles of learning, allowed me the space to make mistakes and become a better researcher, and most importantly, moulded me to become a more confident, independent learner. For that, I am truly grateful - may Allah bless you both.

Special thanks to my friends from the Education Faculty for your support, understanding and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey. To my eight participants, I am forever indebted to all of you for sharing your learning journey with me and for the friendship that we have fostered. And to “Spice” Sue – we did it! Thanks for nudging whenever I started to slow down. Glad that we’re finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel while crossing this troublesome ‘threshold’. Well, I certainly look forward to crossing many more.

Additionally, this thesis would not have been possible without the inspiration and support from my beloved family. I am forever grateful to my beloved sister, Faridah, for her selfless love and motivation – while helping me keep things in perspective. Finally, this thesis is especially dedicated to my loving husband, Md Salehuddin and wonderful children (Aiman, Hannan and Ameerul). Thank you for standing by me through thick and thin, and for your unwavering love, support and continuous prayers. This thesis would never happen without all of you.

*Knowing others is intelligence;  
knowing yourself is wisdom.  
Mastering others is strength;  
mastering yourself is the power.  
(Lao Tzu)*

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