

2021

## Capacity Building as a Midwifery Researcher: Personal Experience as an International Student of PhD Programme at a University in New Zealand

Qorinah Estiningtyas Sakilah Adnani

*Karya Husada Institute of Health Science, Indonesia and Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.aku.edu/jam>



Part of the [Nursing Midwifery Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Adnani, Q. Capacity Building as a Midwifery Researcher: Personal Experience as an International Student of PhD Programme at a University in New Zealand. *Journal of Asian Midwives*. 2021;8(1):6–14.

# Capacity Building as a Midwifery Researcher: Personal Experience as an International Student of PhD Programme at a University in New Zealand

<sup>1,2</sup>Qorinah Estiningtyas Sakilah Adnani\*

1. Qorinah Estiningtyas Sakilah Adnani Ph.D, M.Keb, SST, RM, Amd.Keb, Senior midwifery lecturer, Department of Midwifery, Karya Husada Institute of Health Science, Kediri, East Java, Indonesia
2. Departement of Midwifery, School of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Email: [qorinahestiningtyas@yahoo.co.id](mailto:qorinahestiningtyas@yahoo.co.id)

**\*Corresponding Author: Qorinah Estiningtyas Sakilah Adnani**

---

## Abstract

Contemporary literature reveals a growing interest among midwives in pursuing Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. This article describes my experience as an international PhD student in a New Zealand midwifery programme. I discuss challenging conditions in completing each process of the PhD in my non-native language. I focus also on how the processes of the PhD assisted me in building my capacity as a midwifery researcher in my home country. I found that pursuing a PhD away from home while conducting research in my home country and expressing my critical thinking in a different language was not easy. Strategies that were identified as supportive, included formal research training, and the academic and non-academic supports to international students. Pursuing a PhD in midwifery was not a straight forward journey. There were many challenges in performing each step of the education process. This personal account may help midwifery colleagues who want to pursue a PhD be more aware of the complexities and challenges of each process in a PhD programme and build supports in advance.

**Keywords:** *Capacity building, Indonesia, international PhD student, education, midwifery, midwifery researcher, New Zealand*

---

## Introduction

There are growing numbers of midwifery scholars who are pursuing Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees (1). The Indonesian Ministry of Research and Technology found no professor in midwifery nor PhD midwifery programme in Indonesia (2). The shortage of such programmes in developing countries such as Indonesia, means that midwifery lecturers need to go overseas to pursue PhD studies. Since 2008, the Government of Indonesian has offered competitive scholarships for registered lecturers to study abroad with the expectation of the development of midwifery lecturer capacity and advancement of the midwifery profession in the home country (3, 4).

Universities in New Zealand increased the number of international PhD students by 120% from 1998 to 2004 and the number has continued to grow (5, 6). Favourable policies, that stipulate international PhD students pay the same tuition fees as domestic students, guarantee the rights of students and their partner to have full-time jobs and enable their children to enroll as domestic students in New Zealand's free-state schools have increased international PhD enrolment from 700 in 2005 to 4,500 in 2017. The policies have resulted in New Zealand having one of the highest shares of international PhD students; specifically, nearly half of New Zealand's PhD candidates come from overseas (7, 8).

However, a 2019 survey revealed that PhD students often experience mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression (9). The problems become greater for international PhD students because of the many obstacles they confront to study abroad. Being an international PhD student poses multiple significant challenges that include cultural, academic, linguistic, pedagogic, social, and psychological adjustments (10-14). To support international PhD student, universities in New Zealand typically offers a broad range of support through international student support, including visa application, insurance, accommodation, setting up a bank account, and learning advisor. This article focuses heavily on my experience in obtaining a PhD degree in midwifery as an international student from Indonesia at a university in New Zealand. I obtained a prestigious scholarship from the Indonesian government to study abroad. My journey to obtaining a PhD included both pleasures and perils. In New Zealand, PhD usually takes approximately 4 to 6 years full time. I graduated from the postgraduate education framework (PhD) of New Zealand midwifery education, which is claimed to offer a world-class service of midwifery education (15, 16). The challenge for the university in

New Zealand was to ensure each PhD graduate will undertake advanced research, develop their careers personally and professionally, and make significant contributions to societies (17).

### **The PhD Programme in Midwifery in New Zealand**

The postgraduate handbook 2020 states “PhD degrees are characterised by advanced study and original research in a discipline and PhD thesis constitutes the entire body of work on which the qualification is judged” (p. 28). It goes on to state PhD students “will attain knowledge, values, and attributes which allow them to make significant contributions to their professional communities and societies through further high-quality research and developments” (17, p:28).

The Graduate Research School provides formal research training to enhance the learning process of PhD students to become independent researchers. These research training courses are flexible and individualised in order to support PhD students to complete their original research. The research training covers all stages of the PhD processes, as well as employability and career pathways of the PhD graduate. Topics covered include positioning your research area, developing interview and presentation skills, attending postgraduate writers’ retreats, obtaining ethics approval, thesis formatting, and attending career fairs (18).

Every PhD student in midwifery focuses on a research project that is directly related to the development of the knowledge base of midwifery and is supervised by two or three midwifery leading researchers. A PhD student has to submit and present a full research proposal no later than 12 months after enrolment and must complete six-monthly progress reports before the submission of the PhD thesis.

There are several stages in the candidature process of writing the research proposal, including the literature review, planning the data collection and obtaining ethics approval. Confirmation of candidature is a significant milestone for every PhD student since it represents the successful passage from provisional to confirmed candidature. The confirmation also demonstrates the capability, suitable scope, and high standard of PhD level work that is required to complete the research. The oral examination is scheduled once a PhD student submits a maximum 100,000 word thesis. The examination panel consists of two or three international experts in midwifery.

### **The Transition to Becoming a PhD Student**

I worked as a registered midwife and certified midwifery lecturer in Indonesia for about ten years, but I decided to step out of my comfort zone into a place where I had not previously ventured, that of pursuing advanced education abroad. Being an international PhD student who crossed the sea to New Zealand was a challenging journey. Born into a middle-class family in a rural area in Tulungagung, East Java, going abroad was an epiphany for me. It seemed an impossible dream as I had never boarded an international flight. From the beginning, I realised that studying in a foreign country meant I had to leave behind my job, family, and friends and I had to face an entirely new culture.

### **English Language Requirements**

I faced many critical times in my PhD journey as English is not my mother tongue. The outcome of my English proficiency test proved that I was a conscientious student who was able to learn a second language. In retrospect, I cried often in despair that I might not succeed in the programme due to the language barrier. I experienced emotional ups and downs and struggled to retain my commitment and attain English proficiency. I was fortunate to learn English from native speakers in an English-speaking country.

### **Preparing the Research Proposal**

I felt a mixture of emotions when I formally enrolled in the PhD programme. I needed to re-think my research proposal. I felt that I was standing outside a dark forest and had to find my way through it without knowing where it would end. Even though I had two supervisors, I was the only person who truly understood my research project and it made me feel emotional and lonely, but joyful at the same time. I thought that no one else could understand what I wanted to achieve. The idea to conduct a study on midwifery education in Indonesia resonated strongly within me because of my background. For more than a decade, I worked as a midwifery lecturer and gained experience and insight into midwifery schools because there were numerous policy and programme changes during that period in Indonesia.

During the candidature process, I was writing, re-writing, analysing, elaborating, criticising, clarifying, articulating, synthesising, structuring, and sense-making with my supervisors. I was challenged by them to be an active learner and thinker. These regular

meetings and my active involvement in various academic activities helped me to develop as a “real” researcher.

### **Conducting Research in my Home Country**

Once ethical approval was obtained from the university and the candidature process was confirmed, I returned to my home country to begin another journey. I thought undertaking a study “at home” would be easy. However, the reality revealed challenges with ethical considerations, personal relationships, recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. I anticipated the recruitment process would be laborious because of geographical access problems and possible cultural resistance from potential participants due to the topic of investigation.

My data were gathered from newly graduated midwives, midwifery students, midwifery lecturers, midwives, and obstetricians using semi-structured face-to-face interviews at 12 midwifery schools in eight cities and six provinces in Indonesia. Several times interviews with participants were rescheduled, which was challenging given the different locations. Going from one city to another city, for example, from Jakarta to Purwokerto, can take more than six hours by train one-way. The research sites were diverse geographically and therefore required using multiple means of transport, such as car, train, bus, minivan, and air flights, along with accommodation expenses.

Throughout the data collection in Indonesia, I regularly met both supervisors in New Zealand via Zoom to reflect on practice. The supervisors’ feedback was significant in maintaining rigour within the research process. During data collection and cross-language research in Indonesia, I had many tremendous experiences including some that were at times frustrating. I learned to make quick decisions in unexpected circumstances and this made me more confident in my ability to be an independent researcher.

### **Writing the PhD Thesis**

Writing in my mother tongue is not an easy activity and was even more challenging in an “alien” language. From the beginning of my PhD journey my application requirements, including the proposed research topic, had to be submitted in English. At every part of the PhD such as the research proposal, literature review, ethics application, data analysis and findings, I had to write in English, to ensure that my thinking was critical and that it was clearly expressed. Writing the final thesis was yet another challenge. I had to write and edit, review, and proofread to make sure my thesis was clean.

When my supervisor showed me a thesis from a former student that was around 300 pages, I felt that despite my work to that point my writing skills were not sufficient to complete a thesis. Frustrated, tired, and desperate were the best words to describe my mental state at that time. I felt that I was “not good enough” to be a PhD student. Faced with a blank page on my screen, I realised that I was the only person who could write and complete my thesis; my supervisors were there to support me professionally. They were always very positive and encouraging but left final decisions to me. I believe that the way my supervisors supported me contributed significantly to help develop my research skills.

### **Capacity Building as a Midwifery Researcher**

Upon reflection, I learned to become an independent researcher by demonstrating an ability to use formal systems and theoretical frameworks that provided structure for how data are analysed to answer a research question. I used this understanding to answer the question of ‘how can midwifery education in Indonesia be strengthened’, and made a substantial contribution to knowledge (19). I believe that my PhD thesis demonstrates the dynamic nature of critical factors to enhance midwifery education, leading to competent and confident midwifery graduates in Indonesia and potentially other developing countries (19).

When I finally received my degree and academic transcript, I had mixed feelings as this was a new start to the next challenging process of being a midwifery lecturer in Indonesia. Now, I have further questions about the themes discovered in my study and can view the various stages of future research by having conducted my own first research study. The skills that I gained during PhD processes can be seen as seeds that I have to water and ensure that they thrive to improve me as a lifelong learner and an independent researcher. I now have a licence in the new “PhD in midwifery” with the expectation that it will facilitate and establish my career progression. Gaining a PhD qualification is the first step in navigating a career path as a PhD graduate (20). That is the beginning and not the ending of my long winding academic journey.

## **Conclusion**

My PhD experience is an individual journey. I suggest that midwives or midwifery lecturers who wish to study abroad have a strong and clear motivation for pursuing a PhD from the very beginning. Becoming an independent knowledge seeker and developing continuous critical thinking requires passion and commitment to meet the challenge of completing research that makes a significant contribution to midwifery.

To avoid a very heavy workload of writing up the final thesis at the end, it should be started from the early phase of the research process. It is better to give enough time to hone, review, and critique the thesis and ask our colleagues to provide constructive and critical feedback. I would suggest to be kind and be nice to ourselves to offer a space to write up, which may have a positive impact on the writing process.

The PhD programme imparts knowledge and skill, and states in my transcript that “PhD graduates will have a highly developed knowledge and understanding of their chosen field of study and will be able to contribute at an internationally recognised standard to original scholarship and research”. I believe that the PhD programme has successfully supported me, a local midwifery researcher, to become a global midwifery researcher. I have been discovering untapped potential for the post PhD phase. My personal experience may be beneficial and relevant to other midwives who want to broaden their horizons by studying abroad. Holding a PhD degree in midwifery from an overseas university can contribute to the development of capacity of midwifery leaders, which benefits the profession as a whole.

## **Acknowledgments**

QESA was supported by the Indonesia Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education doctoral scholarship under contract 178.21/E4.4/2014, the Indonesia Ministry of Finance Endowment Fund for Education dissertation scholarship under contract PRJ-4592/LPDP.2/2016 and Auckland University of Technology-DIKTI doctoral scholarship. I extend my sincere gratitude to both of my PhD supervisors, Professor Judith McAra-Couper and Dr Andrea Gilkison, who accompanied and played a significant role during all my PhD processes.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

## References

1. MacVane, F. (2013). The PhD process: perils and pleasures. *MIDIRS Midwifery Digest*, 23: 4, pp 421-425.
2. The Indonesian Ministry Research and Technology. (2020). Sinta Indonesia author subject Midwifery. Retrieved from <https://sinta.ristekbrin.go.id/authors/area/45524?area=Midwifery>
3. Ristekdikti. (2019). Pedoman beasiswa pendidikan pascasarjana luar negeri Direktorat Jenderal Sumber Daya Ilmu Pengetahuan, Teknologi, dan Pendidikan Tinggi tahun 2019. Retrieved from <http://beasiswadosen.kemdikbud.go.id/bppln/index.php/home/pedoman>
4. LPDP. (2020). Beasiswa perguruan tinggi utama dunia. Retrieved from <https://www.lpdp.kemenkeu.go.id/in/page/beasiswa-ptud-2020>
5. The New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2006). OECD Thematic review of tertiary education New Zealand country background report. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/newzealand/36441052.pdf>
6. New Zealand Education. (2018). Trends in the number of international students enrolled with New Zealand providers. Retrieved from <https://enz.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Trends-in-the-number-of-international-students-enrolled-with-New-Zealand-providers.pdf>
7. Berquist, B. (2016). New Zealand's international PhD strategy: A holistic analysis 2005-2015. Retrieved from <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/auckland/study/international-students/About-the-International-Office/Director/nz-international-phd-strategy.pdf>
8. OECD. (2019). Education at a glance 2019 Country note New Zealand.
9. Woolston, C. (2019). PhD poll reveals fear and joy, contentment and anguish. *Nature*, 575: 14, pp 403-406.
10. Brown, L & Holloway, I. (2008). The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 7: 2, 232-249. doi: 10.1177/1475240908091306

11. Cree, V. (2012). I'd like to call you my mother. Reflections on supervising international PhD students in social work. *Social Work Education*, 31: 4, 451-464. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2011.562287
12. Doyle, S et al., (2018). African international doctoral students in New Zealand: Englishes, doctoral writing and intercultural supervision. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37: 1, 1-14. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2017.1339182
13. Mesidor, J & Sly, K. (2016). Factors that contribute to the adjustment of international students. *Journal of International Studies*, 6: 1, 262-282
14. Nguyen, N & Robertson, M. (2020). International students enacting agency in their PhD journey. *Teaching in Higher Education*. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2020.1747423
15. New Zealand College of Midwives. (2016). New Zealand midwifery education delivering a world class service. Retrieved from <https://www.midwife.org.nz/latest-news/midwifery-education-world-class/>
16. Pairman, S. (2006). Education framework. *New Zealand College of Midwives Journal*, (22), 5-14
17. Auckland University of Technology. (2020). Postgraduate handbook 2020. The Graduate Research School, Auckland University of Technology. Auckland New Zealand.
18. Graduate Research School AUT. (2020). Seminars and workshops for postgraduate research students. Retrieve from <https://student.aut.ac.nz/postgraduate-research/postgraduate-student-community-and-events/seminars-and-workshops>
19. Adnani, QES. (2020). *How Can Midwifery Education in Indonesia Be Strengthened?* (PhD thesis), Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Retrieved from <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/13409>
20. Brook, J et al. (2010). Conceptions of doctoral education: the PhD as pathmaking. *Reflective Practice*, 11: 5, 657-668. doi: 10.1080/14623943.2010.516981