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The Postgraduate Journey: On Craving for 'Mee Goreng Mamak' and Passion towards Research

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This prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to think of a basic question – why are we created and what are our basic roles on this earth?

One should be thinking of creating more values from his or her research. The research should be useful for others, not only for the advancement of theory but reference to guide the community. For one, the pandemic has caused not only the health issues but psychosocial milieus that warrant for attention and solutions, especially from the community of knowledge workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic should drive us to think hard of our roles to face the fragile future and what's left after the pandemic. Academic community including postgraduate students should come forward with new knowledge, principles and innovation that would bring about impacts to the society, and in turn, shape the right narratives about Islam and what it has to offer to humanity.

Muslims, who used to lead the advancement of knowledge, are currently lagging behind in the development of initiatives to rejuvenate the society, being seen as not effective in solving various socio-economic issue faced by the society as a result of the pandemic.

On that note, there is a question – why should we lead, in terms of research? Prof. Kamal Hassan, in his Vision 2077 quest, underscores the essentiality to build the future of Muslim ummah based on the '*ummatan wasatan*' vision, in line with the notions specified in Al-Baqarah verse 143: *Thus We have made you [community of real Believers of Islam] a Just and Best Nation/Community, (Ummatan Wasatan) so that [with your personalities and lives] you be Witnesses (Shuhadā') over mankind and the Messenger [Muhammad] be a witness (Shahidan) over you....*

So, the challenge is on us to nurture among the Muslim community the principles of *Wasatiyyah* which is accounted for by a number of salient attributes, namely justice or *adl*; excellence or being the best (*Khairiyyah*); and balance (*Tawāzun* or *i'tidāl*, or *tawassuṭ* between all forms of excess or extravagance (*ifrāṭ*) and deficiency or laxity (*tafrīt*).

The second principle in the above verse, which is the strive to become the excellent people or the very best group, deserves our perusal. Historically, Muslims had achieved such exemplary quality in all aspects of life. The Islamic Golden Age proved that Muslims, regardless of gender, social status or background, are pioneers of many fields of knowledge and contributed immensely to the construct of modern society. However, over

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excellent. Muslim students should not to the idea that they have great roles to play in shaping the narratives for excellent Muslims, i.e., that Muslims were the drivers of cultural and knowledge revolution for the last few centuries. They were instrumental and responsible for putting theories, ideas, discourse on the world map. After all, the first universities, the first formal tertiary education and the first form of academic degrees were initiated by Muslims, proving that Muslims were once ambassadors of Islam in the academic world.

There is a hadith regarding the gloomy future of Muslims, where the characteristics of some individuals are seen to be similar to that of foams on the high seas, with good quantity yet provide meaningless impact in the bigger picture. The hadith went on to describe the people's beauty despite their fragility, even against the slightest pressure. Some are of them are living in their bubble, contented with their situations but lack empathy for others.

Some are easily satisfied with mediocrity with little hunger to get out of their comfort zone and strive for perfection. Some are engrossed with the "world" they created, despite it being small and faulty. They are scared, anxious about stepping out of their "world" and therefore became impervious to the bigger reality of the present society – just like how foams are invulnerable to waves.

Indeed, Muslims may be heading to a bleak future, a future where the quantity is big, but the ones with good quality are few. But that does not mean we could not prevent such a future from happening in our lifetime.

This is where postgraduate students should come in. As disciples of knowledge, they must know that the value of research extends beyond the fulfilment of personal gratification. One day, a scholar would refer to the research report written by postgraduate students. One day, students would read their seniors' writings on their ways to complete academic assignment. One day, postgraduate research work would serve as the foundation for a landmark change in societal trends or administrative governance. That is the role of postgraduate research work in the society.

Like it or not, postgraduate students and their research projects are the pillars that prevent the Muslim knowledge foundation from tumbling, and at the same time being the building blocks to every advancement of the society in the future.

It is, hence, important for postgraduate students to hold strong to the 'heart' or passion in their research. It is observed that females would always talk with emotion, and give value to feelings above logic, while men tend to prefer specific interest or passion as the 'drive' in doing research. Whatever the drive is, one thing for sure is that postgraduate journey is indeed long, arduous and unpredictable. Nevertheless, such a journey will be made easier and enjoyable if a postgraduate student conducts research in an area that he or she is passionate about.

Passion is what distinguishes *mee goreng mamak* from perhaps pesto pasta, or between the routine homemade dish by your mom to the same dish that comes from a restaurant. Passion is what adds 'kaw' – that is a Malay slang – into your research. The postgraduate journey is about your love for an area of knowledge where you wish to make a mark upon. It's your love that should give you strength in carrying out the postgraduate journey. Perhaps it is apt to quote Pak Hamka here:

Cinta bukan mengajar kita lemah, tetapi membangkitkan kekuatan.

Cinta bukan mengajar kita menghinakan diri, tetapi menghembuskan kegagalan.

Cinta bukan melemahkan semangat, tetapi membangkitkan semangat.

Let us show passion in our research. Let us prove the Islamic upholding of *ilm*. Let us strive for the perfection of knowledge and venture into new territories without fear of the unknown. Let us do all of those together and lead the way for the Muslim world to a brighter future.

At institutional level, the quality of postgraduate research and supervision depends substantially on the number of activities that a university organises for her students. A development programme, like colloquium, is a good avenue for students to gain experience, celebrate achievements and envisage future endeavours. Postgraduate colloquium could be a platform to brush up students' performance, in terms of academic writing as well as oral presentation.***

(Prof. Dr. Ida Madiha Abdul Ghani Azmi is Dean, Centre for Postgraduate Studies, IIUM. This article is taken from her closing remarks at the International Postgraduate Colloquium and Research Poster Competition organised by Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (KIRKHS) in collaboration with Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah (USAS) and Asian Islamic University Association (AIUA), 15-17 June 2021.)

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