

Interview by Ahmad Suaedy with Dewi Fajarningsih, Jakarta, 13 May 2014

MA, Biotechnology, University of Queensland, 2009-2010

[Edited translation from the Indonesian]

T: Mbak, can you tell me your educational background since kindergarten. Or since you were born.

DF: I was born in Sleman, the native of Jogja. I had been in Jogja since I was born until I got into university. My elementary school was in Sleman too, SD Muhammadiyah Sleman. Junior high school also, State Junior High School 2 Sleman. The senior high school was in Kodya, State Senior High School 10 Jogja. Then I enrolled in UGM majoring Biology.

After that, I worked for several years. Then, I applied for a scholarship, I was successful in my application for an Australian scholarship. I got ADS, to do a MA in biotechnology.

T: After graduating from Biology in UGM, did you get scholarship directly or work for a while?

DF: I worked. After graduation, I was unemployed for about a year, then I worked here. I started working in 2005, going to Australia in 2009.

T: Where did you get the information about Australian scholarship?

DF: I guess, since I was in bachelor degree I had been willing to study abroad. I often went to scholarship exhibitions.

T: So you already had the intention since you were doing your bachelor degree?

DF: Yes, this was also the reason why I wanted to be a civil servant. One of my dreams was going there, so I could study again. I thought I would.

T: Why did you choose Australia?

DF: Actually, I applied to several countries. Applied to Netherland, Japan, but my luck was in Australia.

T: What did you take in Australia?

DF: I took Biotechnology. Master of biotechnology, because it fits in my job.

T: When did you start?

DF: Since January 2009 until December 2010.

T: Before going there, was there any special preparation, such as language course?

DF: That was a part of the scholarship program. So ADS offered such preparation, the name is English Academic Preparation, if I am not mistaken. So there was language preparation. IELTS, when I applied I hadn't reach 6,5 but it required 6,5. I already got 6,5 but the writing was under 6. So, I had to fix the all score bands. No score can be under 6. I got 8 weeks at that time.

T: Where?

DF: At IALF Jakarta. It is a part of ADS. SO, the preparation is to prepare increasing the IELTS to meet the requirements from the university, the university also has “cultural course”. They gave 6-9 weeks actually. I got 8 weeks. It depends on the TOELF score.

T: Was it full time?

DF: Yes, it was. I was off from my office for a while.

T: Had you been to Australia before studying there?

DF: Never.

T: What city did you study in?

DF: Brisbane.

T: What university?

DF: University of Queensland.

T: In your batch, did you have any friends from here?

DF: Many because there were more than ten in ADS for one batch. There might have been about 15 people together.

T: How many people taking biotechnology?

DF: There were two others, the three of us lived in one house. Besides me, there is a lecturer from UIN Jogja, and the other is a researcher from Litbang Kesehatan, a friend of Mbak Retno at office. They take Molecular Biology, I am biotechnology. So, there are some similar courses.

T: The first time coming to Australia, was there any culture shock?

J: The first time, certainly. Especially for the currency. That was the funny part. If I wanted to shop, I converted from dollar to rupiahs. So it was very expensive. Then I remember my friend saying that if I wanted to shop, just shop, don't convert it. Sometimes, I bought nothing. That was the funny part.

Then, when I was in Australia, MA students had great willingness to study. There were also many honours students. The BA takes 3 years, then they take honours for 1 year. So, they take PhD directly. So, it is rare for them to do the MA. So, especially for the science, after 3 years studying they get bachelor. If the score is good, they continue directly to honours.

T: Such as master?

DF: No, what can I call it? It is like one year research. If the result is good, there will be first class and second class. There are scores. So, you can then continue to PhD. So, you don't need to take the MA. So, master degree is filled with international students. So, when I was there, studying in Australia was like studying in Bombay. Most of my classmates were Indians. The Indians, Asians, and a few western people. They are a few from France, USA, and some from Australia. So I felt like am I in Australia or India? Haha.

The language as well was a challenge, because I choose to live with Indonesians, my English didn't improve significantly and because our interactions with international students on campus were short. When I went home, the friends were Indonesians.

T: Did you adapt in class? Some complain in the beginning of the course, they didn't understand what the lecturers saying. Did you experience it?

DF: A bit. There was favourite lecturer of mine. He was from Singapore. Indian Singapore, so... hmm..

T: So the language is easy to understand?

DF: Yes, the accent is Malay English. Then the others, there were a few problems, the education system always opens for feedback. If there is a problem, "just say it then there will be feedback"

T: In terms of season, did you adapt?

DF: Season, No. I am in Queensland, so it is not that different form home. If it was cold, it reached 9 degrees. It wasn't problem.

T: Are you close to your classmates?

DF: More likely. But my close friends are also Asians. Such as Vietnamese, Malaysian, etc. In the first year, I took the mix. One year course and the next is research. When I took the course, most of my friends were Asians and it was 4 units, so 4 meetings multiple with 2 hours. So it was 8 hours a week. So the meetings were short. Then there are many assignments. So I only got close to the Asians.

In the second year, I conducted research in a research centre. It was very international. So, in my group, for instance the Australian was only the leader, he was my professor. The PhD candidates were from different countries. The students came from many countries. So, it wasn't strange if there were people talking in strange accents, such as European like Swedes. Their accents were odd. By the second year I had just felt that this was Australia. So, it was like the meetings of culture, so there are many people from different backgrounds.

T: Did you keep in touch with your classmates?

DF: Maybe in Facebook. In social media, only that.

T: Social media was helpful, is that right?

DF: Yeah, very.

T: Some of the graduates said that there were no email and social media back then, so they didn't keep in touch.

DF: So, it stopped there.

T: If you have spare time, such as holiday, where do you go?

DF: When I was taking the course, sometimes even on the weekend there was no time for having fun. But I had activities back then in UQISA, University of Queensland Indonesian Student Association. There was angklung, so we practice once a week sometimes. Then, we performed in some events. Then the standard activity, going to the movies and eating out.

T: How about other city?

DF: Going to another city is possible on the long holidays. Such as in summer break or winter break, it was quite good. Winter break is just two weeks, summer is for a few months. During the winter, I went to Melbourne, for a while. Then I came to Sydney too, for a while as well.

T: Have you been to the beaches?

DF: Queensland is all beach. In Queensland, the attractions are beaches and big theme parks. Such as Movie World.

T: Did you join Indonesian association such as PPI?

DF: Yes, there is PPIA, as well as UQISA. UQISA is for at University of Queensland. There is also IISB*. It is an Indonesian Islamic group. So the activity is a religious meeting. It is also unique, I never joined such a meeting before, but I did back there. So, I was appointed as the member. So, I had to participate actively, didn't I? That is the valuable experience. So, it might be my way finding it. *IISB = Indonesian Islamic Society of Brisbane.

T: So, you joined as the member of the organization?

DF: Yes, in IISB. I became the member. The weird part in Australia, PPIA is mostly filled with hmm... we call them private students. The Bachelor students who become the active members are the children of the rich in Indonesia. I don't know why. So, it becomes the barrier for us, we didn't blend between the scholarship students and the private, there was a barrier. Because the lifestyles are different maybe, the scholarship ones are simple, but the private are rich.

T: Where do you live, mbak?

DF: I live near campus, around campus.

T: Single or shared room?

DF: I was in a unit, there are three from Indonesia.

T: Three people in one house?

DF: Yes, one house had two rooms. One big room for two people. One single for one.

T: Was it comfortable living there?

DF: Comfortable, indeed. I lived there for two years.

T: It's near to campus, so you walk there, or how did you go?

DF: People there like exercise, walking or riding a bike. Because I am Indonesian, I seldom walked. So, I liked taking the bus. There is a ferry there as well. The transportation is good. So, yes, I seldom walked. Taking the bus usually. Though I could walk as well.

T: In terms of food, did you cook or...?

DF: It is also a valuable experience. So, I used to be unable to cook, but I missed Indonesian food. So, I learned cooking. If I didn't, I would spend too much. So, I learned cooking. I once cooked gudeg, sold

gudeg when the Merapi erupted. We created fundraising by selling Indonesian food. I made gudeg, alhamdulillah it was sold.

T: Are the ingredients available? Such as ketewel? Hehe.

DF: I used the canned young Jackfruit.

T: Back to the research. What are your researches when you were there?

J: My research is in Pharmacology. Molecular pharmacology. So the bioactive protein was isolated from conus. Conus is like sea snail, it has toxin. That is why a snail walks slowly, but it is dangerous. So, it has toxin. The toxin is isolated, then it becomes the active protein compound. Then I examined the actions, it targeted a certain receptor.

T: Is it related to the current research?

DF: Currently, I am leaning towards hm... Because there are many BST [trans: Brine Shrimp Lethality Test], the tests to test the bioactivity. I learn from there.

T: So, the MA supports the next research?

DF: Yes, and I am able to have the networks. So, I already have the network. Actually, I want to study again. But, there is a rule at the office that I have to work 2 plus 1. So I have to work for 5 years, then I can continue PhD. I plan to go back to the same lab.

T: Is it the special rule in this office?

DF: Yes, it is the rule in our ministry.

T: How does the Australian scholarship affect your work and yourself?

DF: For myself, I get many new experiences, it enrich me as a person. For instance, I become more independent. Back then I was surrounded by positive people, they are the ones I miss the most now. Because I think that my friends are very positive. We support each other, they are smart. We can laugh, but the topics are meaningful. It was crazy sometimes, but it was positive. So, when I got back to Indonesia, I got culture shock.

So, I went from the organized to the unorganized. The difference is huge. For the last year, I began my research in the research center, so I really feel the melding of the culture. I know people from different backgrounds. So I know, basically people are kind. And I am with my Islam, it is a barrier actually.

T: You actually find spiritual experience there?

DF: Yes.

T: How about the effect on work?

DF: Maybe because when I went home, after a while, I got a new responsibility. Suddenly, I got an official mandate to be a head of microbiology lab at that time. Then I was moved from biotechnology. I was asked to manage, become the managing editor for the academic papers of the office. It was because they considered that with my experience of studying for my master degree my quality of work has improved. So, unconsciously, I improve my quality. Because I am a researcher, I am functional. So, all

is judged by our achievements, the credits etc. So, when it was evaluation, I have just recognized my achievements. Actually, I am quite happy, have done more, but I am not aware of that.

So, I think that is what I get when I was in Australia. The hard work, etc. How I loved science and become passionate about it.

T: How about the networking?

DF: That is also, we get to know one another. Luckily, there are social media, so we can keep in touch. There is LinkedIn, some giving references. When I want to continue my PhD that is the next step. Alhamdulillah, it is the easy one.

T: Since coming home, have you gone there again?

J: I haven't. One more thing, because I had experience of getting scholarship, I get more scholarships after that. For the Short Course, because I cannot continue studying. I got StuNed once. I got StuNed again actually, it was to be this July, but because they needed more participants it was cancelled.

So I feel more confident, I know the tricks. So when I apply, I understand how it works.

T: StuNed is Netherland, right?

DF: Yes.

T: After going to Australia, what other countries you have visited?

J: Just the Netherlands.

T: Did you keep in touch with your university in Australia?

DF: Yes. UQ has just made alumni organization, including Indonesia. The, it has good networking with institutions in Indonesia. It even has an office in Indonesia. It has many receptions each year. So the networking is with the alumni of UQ.

T: Did you keep in touch with the professor there?

DF: Yes, that is my asset to continue my PhD later, the references from them.

T: Related to leadership, what is the effect of getting scholarship in Australia?

DF: I am not aware that I became more confident. So when I get back home, I get new opportunities.

T: One batch is dominated by male or female?

DF: I guess mine was balance.

T: The biotechnology research is related to government policy, or?

DF: Hmm, maybe indirectly. Because it is a part of technology. Such as innovation. This is one of the focuses in Indonesia.

T: When you conducted the research in Australia, did you have connections with institution outside university?

DF: No. I was in a research centre but it is under the university. So the research centre is part of the uni.

T: It was in 2009, right? How was the political condition between Indonesia and Australia back then?

DF: It was fine I guess. But before, it was like East Timor, there was still an impact.

T: When you were there, did you have favourite TV channel?

DF: I was watching Master Chef Australia. Also the shows that are also available here such as Criminal Mind.

T: Did you attend any live performance there?

DF: I love it, actually. I once saw one in Opera House in Sydney. It was a bit expensive, but it is okay, it is an experience. It seldom watched such performance in Indonesia. When I got back here, I become fond of watching those like Teater Koma.

T: Did you visit exhibition often?

DF: Maybe just museum.

T: What is the name of this office?

DF: It is the Great Body of Research and Development of Biotechnology, Marine, and Sea Products.

T: What is the name of the lab?

DF: Biotechnology lab.

T: What is your position now?

DF: At the lab, I am the head. For the research, I am the young researcher.

T: How many years have you spent in this office?

DF: I joined in 2005. It means 9 years.

T: Okay, I think it is enough. Thank you so much. It is so helpful.

DF: You are welcome.

[END]