

**One Small Step For me, One Giant Leap for the Bangsamoro:
A Reflection On A Year of Graduate Studies Abroad**

by Loren Hallilah I. Lao



Three applications, two trainings and one helluva year of completely different academic and cultural experience summarize my journey as a Ford Fellow.

I had the first chance to apply for Ford Scholarship while still in law school. I was pre-selected by Mindanao State University (MSU) and was subsequently given the dossier by IFP but I never made it to the interview stage because the unsystematic utility billing in Marawi prevented me from producing proof of my billing address. The second time was in 2008 when a senior MSU colleague (apparently, MSU people think I need to apply for this scholarship) gave me a dossier intended for MSU again. This time I qualified for the interview. Unfortunately, the day of the interview clashed with the pre-departure orientation for a one-month training I was to undergo in the US. The third time in 2009, IFP ran out of dossier and they had to give me a photocopy of the application form. I made it to the interview this time but did not get selected as fellow-elect.

Good news came while I was in a training in Cyberjaya, Malaysia and the orientation for the 2009 Ford Cohort was going on in Manila. Ma'am Luisa called me up to say, one fellow-elect backed out and chose another scholarship and as an alternate, I was to fill in the vacancy. Right after landing in Cagayan de Oro from that Malaysia training, I received a call from PAEF that I also qualified as an alternate in the Fulbright Scholarship Program and should I accept the offer, I had to go through the same process as the fellow-elects. I chose Ford because the Fulbright offer was limited to a study in the US and also because PAEF attached the condition that I study Human Rights.

Since I missed the orientation, this *probinsyana* (who always has difficulty navigating Metro Manila) had to go to the language test in Ateneo, the computer test in the Statistics Office and the special orientation in PSSC on her own. If my scores in the tests had proved low, I would have undergone both language and Computer training, which means I had to be in Manila for the entire two months of Pre-Academic Training in October and November. I was in the taxi after leaving PSSC for my special orientation when Ma'am Dada phoned to say I passed the language test. But, as I had expected, I scored low in the Computer test and so I had to attend only the computer and research training in November. This was good news to me as I was going to South Korea in October. With this trip, I would feel the terms that go with being a fellow-elect.

I remember the first day of the Computer Training. I had to deal with the death of an aunt and meeting many of my fellow cohort for the first time but I was nevertheless excited for the month-long training. Both the Computer and Research Training were refreshers. My computer knowledge is largely based on trial and error and I was happy to learn stuffs I found helpful. I initially thought the research training to be ho-hum as I had sat in countless thesis defences. But it was above my head when the training began with a lecture on Foucault. Before this lecture, the only thing I knew about Foucault was he died of AIDS and that I had difficulty spelling his name. It was this lecture that made me read his book *Discipline and Punish* and realized his ideas have significant bearing on my profession.

Come the university application stage, there was no doubt I would chose UK universities since the country has a common law system. Philippine law is largely hewn after the civil law system but I wanted to study in an environment with a different legal system. This way, I do not only learn about my chosen specialisation but I would also learn a different legal system. I wanted to specialise in International Economic Law and Development because I was influenced by my involvement in non-government work on youth, Muslim women's rights and the plight of the Bangsamoro. To my mind, addressing the Moro problem does not end with peace. The economy has to be developed in order for these people not to be driven to the mountains. That is why I wanted to study the role of law in this area. Moreover, I believe that if I have to devote my legal expertise to this cause, it has to be in an area where we have few experts.

I was asked by colleagues, mentors and even in the PAEF interview, why I do not want to study Human Rights. My answer is simple. I know many Moro lawyers who specialise in Human Rights and I do not know of anyone specialising in Economic law. Surely, we cannot have a balanced progress with a legal expertise concentrated mostly on Human Rights. Someone has to specialise in a different area.

Though I would have wanted to send applications to the Oxbridge universities, we were told not to, since these universities no longer share costs with Ford. The top choice I wrote in my application was Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL) because it has an array of modules from which I could cherry-pick those which will fit most the objectives of my study. I never heard about this University before but a google on top law schools in UK always yielded QMUL law school as the third best after Oxford and Cambridge, and even the first in London. The British Council guide book on UK universities assured me on this ranking

Then came the waiting period. The replies to my applications came to me in the reverse order I wanted them. The first University to accept my application was Manchester University and the second was Birkbeck, University of London. I was getting worried about my top choice rejecting me but in mid-May, more than two months after Manchester accepted my application, I received the news that QMUL finally accepted my application.

In late June, while waiting for my scholarship contract to apply for UK visa, I was invited to attend the Musawah meeting in Jogjakarta to be held on the first week of August. Since I was scheduled to leave for UK in late September, I accepted the invite. Two weeks later I got a call from Ma'am Dada that the British Council recommended that I attend the pre-sessional English course in QMUL because it would also be a good chance for me to be acquainted with the new culture, new city and new academic system. To attend this course, I had to leave in late August. My tickets, hotel, allowances for the Jogja meeting have been finalised and I could not back out on the trip. So in late July, I rushed to Manila even before my scholarship contract arrived hoping to apply for a UK visa before I left for Jogja on the first week of August. The contract arrived on the day I arrived in Manila but there was another glitch, my CAS stated my undergraduate law degree to be BA Law instead of Bachelor of Laws. I was advised to have this corrected before applying for visa as this might pose some problem with the embassy. However, QMUL, probably overwhelmed with enrolment workload was not replying to emails from me and Ma'am Dada. I would later learn that my school had around 600 postgrad students in law alone!

I applied for visa without the correction on my CAS as I was already running out of time. I run the risk of getting my passport stranded in the UK embassy on the date of my flight to Jogja. I submitted my visa application on a Tuesday and ran to the airport for a flight to CDO on a ticket twice rebooked. The flight was already boarding when I reached the check-in counters but pleaded with station agents to let me board the flight. Back in Marawi, I got busy holding special classes, a legal outreach and seminars crammed in five days. I was leaving for Manila the next Sunday for the Jogja trip. Friday afternoon, I called IFP if they received my passport and I was told no. I had already asked a cousin in Manila to check the courier's branches near the PSSC and see if my package was there but before this cousin could do as instructed, Ma'am Dada called to say they received my passport and congratulated me on the approved visa. Only then did I realise that I was so focused on knowing whether my passport had arrived before the weekend that at that point, I did not mind at all if I was granted or denied visa. I just had to get the passport before the weekend or I do not have a passport to leave for Jogja.

Back home from the Jogja meeting, I barely had a week to hold more special classes and do the packing before I had to fly back to Manila for the pre-departure orientation. In Manila, a flurry of trips to the IFP and *despedidas* from friends and relatives kept me so busy that before I could catch my breath I was already off to London. At the Heathrow Airport, I remember trying to buy tube tickets to go to QMUL in Mile End but I could not find the station from the train map. When I finally asked the station agent, she said, "First of all, this is not the train you're looking for." I managed to find the tube station but the ticket machine would not dispense tickets for the line I selected. I went to a ticket agent again and was told that the line I wanted to take was not operating that day. I would later learn that many tube lines close on weekends for the tube upgrade.

The fellowship stage began with a pre-sessional course in English. The first day of class had us paired with a classmate we had to introduce and my tutor's first question when he heard me speak was what was I doing in the class. Having studied English since Day 1 in grade school and majored in English in College, I nevertheless looked at the course as another chance to enhance my command of the English language under the tutorial of native speakers. Indeed, the course had prepared me with skills I would need during term time as we were taught access to library resources, research skills, etc. Although a session on library access was held during the term time orientation, I was already well acquainted with it and had practical experience of the library during the pre-sessional course. The pre-

sessional course was very helpful for me since law studies in the Philippines is dominantly conducted through recitation of statutes. The course prepared me for the research intensive law studies here. It was also the perfect time for me to adjust before I begin the term time course because I was so lonely on my first month in London.

During term time, we were required to register in three course modules plus the dissertation module. Three modules means I only go to class six hours a week. I thought I had so much free time on my hand that I decided to max out this opportunity and audited two additional modules. When I asked permission from the Professor handling the first module I audited, she made it clear she was not very enthusiastic about audits as these students would come and sit in class without actively participating in the discussion and assignments. This had me challenged and worked doubly hard for this module. Later this Professor would pick me out first over other students registered in this module when she assigned class presentations. When I asked her if she would be willing to be my reference, she replied, "Of course, I will [refer you]." My classmates were also surprised to learn at the end of the term that I was not registered in that module, saying, "But you worked so hard."

When I return to the Philippines, I will be bringing home to my country important lessons I learned from my study in UK. Of course, specialising in International Business Law made me realise the role of law and legal institutions in the country's economic growth. Aside from specialisation, this study opened to me the vast world of International Law, an area in which I previously had very limited knowledge as we only studied a two-unit course on international law back in law school. In relation to this, I also learned the British (and European) attitude towards international and regional law. Here, they study Union law with the same importance they give to their national laws. Law studies in the Philippines by contrast are quite "narcissistic." The curricula are concentrated on Philippine laws with barely a glance on international law and none on ASEAN legal instruments. Law studies here are also dynamic. New legal issues, new concerns usually lead to new modules on these topics. In the Philippines, legal studies seem to be petrified in the Bar subjects and completely oblivious to new legal issues and concerns. For example, modules and specialisations on women's rights, law and development, intellectual property rights, are not studied in Philippine law schools. In fact, new legislations in the Philippines rarely get to be studied in law schools. But perhaps, what had me most flabbergasted with law studies here is that they may be done entirely for academic purposes, not for legal practice, and that law degree is not a requirement to be a lawyer! In the Philippines, even purely law academicians may not teach law if they are not members of the Bar!

The exposure in the English educational system also had me assessing the Philippine system. Over here, academic research is greatly valued and many policies, court decisions rely on them. Research, I'm afraid is conspicuously absent in the Philippine educational system. None of my professors here, for example, has not published a written work. I cannot say the same thing for my professors back in the Philippines, not because they are not good in their fields but because the academic culture is completely different and research is not greatly valued there. MSU, as another example, has three functions, instruction, research and extension but its performance on these three is glaringly uneven. While the instruction function of the university produces graduates who are top notchers in board exams, its research and extension functions are not as productive.

Beyond the curricula, I learned to be flexible when it came time to decide on my dissertation topic. When we were required to submit a dissertation proposal during the PAT, I worked on the topic "Judicial Interference in Philippine Economic Policies." But early on in term time, we were told that Supervisors may not be interested with a topic entirely confined to our country's jurisdiction as the

topic may be completely alien to them. So I had to abandon the topic I worked on during the PAT and decided to work on something relevant to the supervisors but a topic that should not be entirely off-tangent to my country. The Lisbon Treaty, which has entered into force for barely a year when we had to submit topics for dissertation, has transferred the exclusive competence to conclude international agreements on investments from the Member States to the Union so I proposed to study the status and prospects of the existing investment agreements between the EU member states and the Philippines.

I also learned a lot about this country. Actually, I have seen the best and worst side of her during my stay here, from the royal wedding to the unroyal riots. I particularly like that this country is sensitive to the needs of the minorities. When I once placed an order in a fast food for example, I was warned by the Caucasian waitress, on seeing my veil, that their chicken is not *halal*. When I tried to buy cupcakes at a supermarket, the guy behind the counter told me one cupcake contains lard. Compare this with the proprietor of a fast food in a mall in Manila who told the waitress not to tell us their meals had pork ingredients because we do not eat pork or the lady manning a painting exhibit in Intramuros who did not let us in because they only cater to foreigners, I feel better treated in this foreign country than in the country where I am a native. UK is not exactly the perfect haven for Muslims as here is also the base of the English Defence League and here also are some media personalities who chose to paint followers of my religion in a bad light but the incidents I have mentioned somehow gave me assurance in my dietary requirements that I would not feel in the non-Muslim areas of my own country.

As to my plans in the future, I plan to work in a way that the newly acquired knowledge and skills will be of particular use to my country especially to fellow Bangsamoro. I have submitted applications to work in the Finance and Trade departments of the government. I also plan to share the ideas I learned through a part time lecturership in law school. And lastly, I intend to use this new knowledge as I continue to do volunteer work in my spare time on causes close to my heart, the Bangsamoro and Muslim Moro women.

I have said so much but if I have to capture the implication of the entire fellowship experience in a few words, a remark from a friend, paraphrasing Neil Armstrong, says it best: 'One small step for me, one giant leap for the Bangsamoro.'