

# ***The Rhodes Scholarship for Malaysia in Partnership with Yayasan Khazanah*** – Unofficial guide for prospective applicants

**Written by Malaysian Rhodes Scholars**

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## **Preface**

This guide is **NOT** an official communication from the Rhodes Trust. It was prepared by current and alumni Malaysian Rhodes Scholars with the hope that all applicants have equal access to sufficient guidance for preparing for the Rhodes Scholarship for Malaysia.

## **General**

- **Take a leap of faith and just apply.** If you meet the six basic eligibility criteria—nationality, education/residency, age, academic achievement, English language, and number of application attempts—we would encourage you to just apply and give your best shot. Many scholars enter the application process highly doubtful of getting through only to be pleasantly surprised later on. We recognize that English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL can be financially and logistically inaccessible to Malaysian university students in some cities; do note that English language test waivers can be submitted in lieu, and the eligibility criteria for this is outlined in: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/international-applicants/english-language-requirements>
- **Embrace the process of discovery that comes with applying.** The process of applying for the scholarship itself can be very rewarding as it teaches you a lot about yourself, your values, and your past experiences, and it provides you the opportunity to hone important skills, such as writing, requesting for recommendation letters, and presenting yourself and your experiences well. While you would need to dedicate a proportion of your time to prepare your application, the learning you gain—regardless of final outcome—can be very gratifying.
- **Give yourself ample time to prepare a ‘good enough’ application.** There are four main sets of documents to submit—a personal statement, an academic statement, five recommendation letters, and a CV. That’s a lot to do, so make sure you start early, plan ahead and break down the work into small and manageable tasks over a good period. The closing date is usually on Merdeka Day (31 August), but this can vary from one year to another. Remember that no application is ever perfect—so strive to give your best effort, rather than aim for perfection.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** Applying for a competitive scholarship can be a daunting and anxiety-inducing process. It is pretty normal to feel self-doubt or inadequacy during the application process, but remember that *your worth is not defined by applications* and that everyone has

both strengths and weaknesses. A common self-invalidating misconception is that a Rhodes scholar has got everything figured out. This is untrue—it is more important to recognize your starting point, the road you have taken and the experiences that have shaped you and your aspirations. Focus on what you do have—not what you don’t—and focus on the next steps you have control over—the next word, the next document, the next person to talk to.

- **Think about how different application components can complement each other to form a coherent story.** You will be submitting academic transcripts, a resume, recommendation letters, an academic statement, and a personal statement when applying for the Rhodes Scholarship. And if you go through, you will also need to attend an interview. Think of each of these components as ingredients for a good larger story. What story would you like to tell? How would you like to tell it? What story does each component tell? If your resume or recommendation letter (sometimes one can guess what they would say) talks about a particular experience, you might not want to repeat it again in your personal statement if it doesn’t add value to the reader. Or if you do, you ought to elaborate and deepen that information so that it adds value. Remember there is a word-count limit for the statements and a limited time to engage with interviewers, so use the space wisely.
- **Reach out to a mentor or anyone who is invested in your growth.** You will find it encouraging to speak to a mentor about your intent to apply for the scholarship. A mentor could be a lecturer, a supervisor, a coach or anyone who is genuinely invested in your growth. They can provide you with insights, resources and connections that may not be readily available to you. When you vocalize your motivations, they may also provide a third-person perspective on aspects of your experiences that you should include or omit from your application. Ultimately, seek out support and remember that you do not have to go through this daunting journey alone.

## Recommendation Letters

*The Application requires three 'Academic' References and two 'Character' Reference*

- **Build relationships early.** To have a referee, you need to proactively cultivate relationships with your supervisors or lecturers as you go through your academic journey. This is not to say that you build relationships for the sole purpose of a recommendation letter. Rather, you foster genuine relationships with them so they can write a recommendation letter that truly reflects your character.
  - **Provide enough information to your referee early on.** When emailing or approaching your referee for the first time, make sure you at least provide
    - a. A short background about the Scholarship
    - b. Information about what comments are required in the letter
    - c. Format of the letter
    - d. The submission deadline. You can also send them the [Guidance for Referees](#) document available on the Rhodes website
  - **Choose quality and depth over name.** It is sometimes believed that if we were to get someone well-known—let's say a Tan Sri or a known politician—to write our recommendation letter, we would have an automatic advantage over other applicants. This is not true. What matters is really the *content* of the letter. More importantly, you ought to ask:
    - Does the person know you well?
    - Can they speak to both your strengths and your weaknesses?
    - What experiences of yours can they speak to that would draw out the best of your qualities and values?
  - **Do not ghostwrite or edit the letter for your referee.** You may submit a CV to your referee to highlight a few key experiences or qualities, but you should never ghostwrite the letter or edit the letter directly for your referee. Three reasons. One, the selection committee would likely be experienced enough to determine whether a letter is genuinely written. Ghostwriting might also result in your voice, rather than the voice of your referee, awkwardly seeping through. Two, having many different voices in your application could be a good thing. It helps paint a more holistic and three-dimensional picture of you. Three, and most importantly, doing so is simply dishonest and irresponsible.
- Scholar Experience:

'One of my referees sent me his recommendation letter for me to 'check', but I didn't open the document and I kindly declined because I didn't want to interfere with the process. It did not feel right to do so.'

- **Speak to your referee if feasible.** It may be helpful to have a conversation with your referee, if possible, about your expectations, reasons for nominating them and suggest aspects of you or your work that they could speak about with authority. If this is not possible, you may wish to write them a short communication or brief bullet points of aspects of your work that they could include in their letter.
- **Be prepared to pivot.** This is one part of the application that is relatively out of your hands. As the deadline nears, providing an early checkpoint or reminder (rather than a day or two prior to closing date) to your referees could be helpful, as they may juggle other responsibilities. This also provides sufficient and appropriate time to approach new potential referees, should you encounter unforeseen difficulties.
- **Submit early.** It's also better to try to submit a reference or an application a few days early, in case of technical/internet issues.

## CV/Resume

- **Keep it short.** The document should only be one or at maximum, two pages long.
- **Use bullet points.** Try to keep each bullet line to one or two sentences. Remember that the more you include in the CV/Resume, the more you risk diluting your key messages.
- **Employ action verbs.** Action verbs make sentences more tangible (eg. *Designed, Administered, Revised, Composed, Persuaded*).
- **Describe your responsibilities and impact concretely.** What were you responsible for? What did you achieve? You could consider using the popular STAR (Situation, Task, Action, and Result) method. With every bullet point or work experience, you would try to cover all four items. You would describe a situation at your community, workplace, or university (Situation), the challenges you faced (Task), the steps you took to address the issue (Action) and the results of your action (Results).  
Example: *Raised MYR 200,000 in 24 hours (Result) to fund life-saving surgeries for refugee victims injured by the earthquake (Task/Situation) through a well-crafted campaign with social media influencers (Action).*
- **Use clear and simple headers for readability.** If unsure, stick to these four simple headings: *Education, Experiences, Skills, and Awards.*

## 750-word Personal Statement with Prompts

### **Strategy 1: Break down the daunting ‘who are you’ question into more manageable sub-questions.**

Unlike the CV and academic transcript, the personal statement is about a deeper story about yourself, your values, and your journey thus far, as opposed to a simple list of achievements. It ultimately asks the big question: *Who are you?* Don't panic though.

One strategy to start tackling the existential question is to first write down some of your most formative experiences at work, school, or at home as well as your favorite hobbies and then further ask yourself:

- a. Why these experiences or activities matter so much to you,
- b. What you've learned from these experiences,
- c. How they link up with the values of the Scholarship
- d. What you intend to do in Oxford and beyond

Your answers might give you a clue on how you'd like to structure your statement. Remember it's a valuable opportunity for you to give a first overall impression about who you are to the selection committee.

### **Strategy 2: Keep asking yourself ‘why’ questions.**

Why did you study X in university? Why did you choose to spend your time working for X charity or corporation? Why do you believe in what you do? Why do you want the Scholarship? Similarly, these answers would be useful ingredients for your statement.

### **Strategy 3: Use the Prompt questions to form a compelling story.**

Formulate short responses to the Prompt questions and form a structure to your narrative that answers all the questions while still being easy and interesting to read. Even though your answers to the Prompt questions need not follow a particular order, the reader should be able to easily grasp your ‘self, others and the world’ responses after reading the statement.

- **Check if your final statement brings together these key elements and answers all the Prompt questions.** One way to evaluate the quality of your final statement is by checking if it successfully connects:
- a. Your motives/inspirations
  - b. Your learnings
  - c. Activities/passions
  - d. Your goals
  - e. The values of the scholarship together.

Revisit the Prompt questions on the [Information for Candidates](#) to ensure that your statement adequately addresses the questions.

- **Think carefully about when to ‘show’ and when to ‘tell’ your experiences.** It is sometimes more effective to write 'I raised MYR 100,000 for domestic violence survivors through a charity event of 3000 participants' instead of simply *telling* the audience 'I care about social issues'. Numerical evidence isn't the only way of showing though. The use of quotes, anecdotes, vivid descriptive language, and strong verbs are good ways of bringing your experiences to life. But don't overdo it. If you are only trying to make a supplementary point to get to your key point, you might want to use the strategy of telling instead. Sometimes, telling is also a good strategy *after* showing.

- **Be reader-centric.** Be kind and sensitive to your readers by making sure your final statement is:
  - a. Readable
  - b. Comprehensible
  - c. Concise

Is the document easy to read? Does it flow well from head to tail? Have you completed a grammar check? Does it use bombastic or obscure language for the sake of trying to sound smart—i.e. could you simplify your sentences? Does every sentence say something different and useful?

- **Write the 'ugly' first draft early.** This is so that you can let the draft sit and give yourself space to revise it over a length of time. It is normal for one to perceive the first draft as crude and unpolished—sometimes even embarrassing. These are necessary first steps that will enable you to see your writing and thoughts clearer over time and to eventually make necessary revisions.
- **Remember that the personal statement has to be wholly your own work.** No one should edit or write it for you. Any evidence of it not being written fully by you will disqualify you from the Scholarship.
- **Be truthful and honest.** Write from the heart—as cheesy as that may sound. Don't write what you *think* Rhodes wants to hear but actually share *your* story, passion, and ambitions. The personal statement is a chance for the committee to get to know the person behind the CV, grades, and reference letters. It's an opportunity for you to tell your story that ties in all these disparate pieces of information together and share the 'why' guiding the work that you do/hope to do. If you can read your personal statement in your own voice genuinely and confidently, that's probably a good sign.

## 350-word Academic Statement

- **Be concise and provide short, concrete points/examples/evidence.** You have approximately 20 sentences to convince the selection committee on paper that you will be able to gain admission to and thrive within your chosen [Oxford Department](#). This is an exercise to convey how your academic interest fits into an area of study at Oxford and connect this to your past and future in very few words.
- **Carry out in-depth research about the Oxford course(s) you wish to take.** Read up more about the specific course(s) you want to take. Who are the professors? What is it known for? What interesting projects do they do? What is the learning culture like in the department?
- **Link the proposed Oxford course(s) to your previous studies/experiences.** Demonstrate how your past studies have prepared you to excel in your proposed Oxford course(s). What acquired skills would prove advantageous? What related classes have you taken? What has motivated you to explore further?  
You could describe any relevant work/ experience/internships/attachments. It should be noted that many scholars choose to undertake courses in previously unexplored fields while at Oxford. If you propose to do so, you could explain how this provides new skills, perspectives and value to your journey.
- **Describe how the proposed course(s) can help you achieve your goals.** Provide convincing reasons to support your motivations in pursuing the course(s). You should highlight specific skills, knowledge or connections that the course(s) could provide.

## The Dinner/Finalist Interview

*If you've made it to this stage, congratulations!*

- **Practice interviews with professors, employers, family or friends.** Doing so can help you vocalize and frame your answers to commonly asked questions in a concise, easy-to-grasp, and effective way. It would also help you present the best version of yourself to the panelist and identify key themes of your past experiences you may want to highlight during the interview.
- **Think of your interviewers as people.** It is easy and normal to feel intimidated by the selection panel, especially since it often comprises prominent people in Malaysian society, but one good mind trick is to think of each and every one of them as ordinary people, as human beings. Be

respectful, but try your best to converse with them like how you would when sharing ideas, thoughts, and perspectives with your university peers.

- **Be flexible.** The panelists are there to pick your brain, know more about you beyond your application material and assess your fit for the scholarship. Hence, you may be presented with an alternative perspective or asked to defend yours. If this happens, know that the panelists genuinely want to understand your thought process, rather than appear challenging or confrontational.

Scholar Experience:

‘I (still) find interviews terrifying. One (slightly random) thing that helps me is to remember to smile—it helps me feel a bit more confident and reminds me to enjoy the conversation.’

- **Have fun and be curious.** One amazing thing about being a finalist is that you’ll be surrounded by other incredible candidates as well, with whom you would interact during the pre-interview dinner. Be curious about their journey, talk to them, ask them questions. There’s lots you can learn from others! You might make some really good friends :)
- **Celebrate your achievement thus far.** Treat yourself to a lovely *makan* with friends or family after the interview to celebrate your wonderful journey to this point. Regardless of the outcome, you deserve to mark the occasion!

### **Additional Advices from Malaysian Rhodes**

‘The biggest injustice you could do to yourself is exclude yourself from the scholarship before giving the selection panel a chance. As a Malaysian university graduate, I understand how daunting it must be to prepare these application materials with limited support. It may even be your very first time writing many of these statements. However, the application process is a transformative journey of self-reflection, with many skills transferable to future professional applications. I don’t deny the emotions that come with being invested in your application but it’s better to have tried and failed than never tried.’ - Subashan Vadibeler ’21

‘As a woman, check your biases. Studies have shown that women are less likely than men to apply for a role if they don’t have experience in 100% of the requirements outlined in a role description. A mindset that has helped me to counteract this tendency is to shift my focus towards the selection criterias that I strongly align with. Rather than thinking about the things I lack, I proactively highlight my strengths and frame them within the characters that Rhodes is looking for. Remember, it’s not about the number of things you were involved with or the superiority of the positions you held, it’s about the personal impact that you achieved and your passion to ‘fight the world’s fight’ in whatever field that may be.’ - Ezzaty Hasbullah ’20



‘Believe in yourself. Make the effort. You never know. I was overcome with self-doubt when I first considered applying for the Scholarship. If not for a professor who nudged me to apply, I would not have submitted my application. Even when I received the email saying I was selected as a finalist, I was torn about heading home to attend as I had neither the savings to travel nor the belief that I would go through. The same professor thought I was crazy to even consider not going. All of that is history now. I’m grateful that I listened to him and not my inner critic.’ - Joshua Low ’19

‘Go for it! The Rhodes is an incredible opportunity for us Malaysians; there’s relatively little to lose and lots to gain by applying for it. And honestly, just be honest: you don't need to be a superhuman who's the ultimate academic+athlete+artist+activist, but don't sell yourself short either. Even before the Rhodes you've already had valuable experiences and made meaningful connections; here's one more option for what comes next.’ - Tania Loke ’17

## Additional Resources

### Malaysian Scholars’ Contact Information:

Here is the personal contact information of Rhodes Scholars who have agreed to be contacted if you have any questions, but please be mindful that we would not provide you application-specific help that would unfairly advantage you over other individual applicants. We would not comment on any of your application documents, share our application documents, or carry out mock interviews. Other than that, what comprises ‘fair and acceptable’ questions would be left to the discretion of individual Rhodes Scholars.

➤ **Subashan Vadibeler (2021)**

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/subashan-vadibeler-93a811140/>

➤ **Ezzaty Hasbullah (2020)**

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Instagram: @ezzatyhasbullah (I’ve shared some general advice and tips here too)

➤ **Joshua Low (2019)**

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jyal/>

➤ **Tania Loke (2017)**

[tania\\_loke@gmail.com](mailto:tania_loke@gmail.com)

## **Resources That Might Be Helpful:**

### **On a Malaysian Rhodes Scholar's Experiences:**

- Jung Kian Ng (2017): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDbwuelkyPo>

### **On CVs/Resume:**

- Oxford's Career Services Guide: <https://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/cvs>
- STAR Method: <https://resumegenius.com/blog/resume-help/star-method-resume>

### **On Energy/Attention Management:**

- *Deep Work* by Cal Newport

### **On Writing Clearly:**

- *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* by Steven Pinker

### **On Grit/Learning Mentality:**

- Grit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H14bBuluwB8>
- Learning Mentality vs Fixed Mentality: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiiEeMN7vbQ>