

Aye for 'agriprenneur' project

Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) Agripreneur Incubator Programme has received rave reviews as it not only aims to produce more entrepreneurs in the sector but also change the landscape of food production and marketing in the country.



Green fingers: A graduate manually pollinating a rock melon plant at the varsity's agriculture park.

AFTER completing her tertiary studies, Siti Suliza Salamat, 28, had dreams of being an entrepreneur.

Using their savings of RM3,500 as starting capital, Siti Suliza and her friend decided to go into the business of planting rock melons in Serdang.

"But because we did not have enough entrepreneurship knowledge, we suffered financial losses and we were in debt; I couldn't even pay rent for a few months," said the Horticultural Science graduate.

"That experience made me realise that having agricultural know-how without entrepreneurship skills will not get me anywhere.

"This is why I decided to participate in Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) Agripreneur Incubator Programme, and I've found it to be very beneficial just after two months into the course.

"I think this programme will prepare me before I fully embark on a career in agri-preneurship."

Siti Suliza added that the programme exposed participants to the realities of the entrepreneurial world, and helped build her own confidence and competitiveness.

"I've also learnt about the numerous incentives offered by public and private agencies, such as loans, technical assistance, and help with marketing our products.

"My biggest goal is to help fulfil the country's food security needs, by becoming one of Malaysia's main food producers in 10 years' time," she said.

The Agripreneur Incubator Programme is a six-month course developed by UPM's Faculty of Agriculture, with the aim of producing more entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector.

The course offers business skills such as business negotiation techniques, report writing and business plan writing, while giving participants the chance to manage their own commercial projects.

Participants are also offered motivational seminars and visits to private agricultural enterprises to learn from their experiences.

Open to all interested graduates, the programme has three modules of specialisation: aquaculture, biotechnology and crop planting.

Each intake is limited to about 40 graduates, and participants are given an incentive of RM1,000 to purchase their course materials.

While the programme commenced in February, it was officiated by Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin on April 10.

In his speech at event, Mohamed Khaled said the programme would help inculcate entrepreneurial skills among graduates.

"In the long term, we will be able to produce a larger skilled workforce in the agricultural entrepreneurship sector which will not only change the landscape of food production

in the country, but also improve the marketing of agricultural produce to the general public.

“... hopefully in the future we will be able to reduce the country’s dependence on food imports, and tackle the issue of food security,” he added.

Mohamed Khaled also praised the university for involving the private sector when developing the course.

“This sort of approach should be encouraged as it provides a win-win situation for both parties, and the (programme’s) participants will be able to learn from the real business world through the guidance of their mentors,” he said.

Commenting on his visit to the participants’ project sites, Mohamed Khaled said that such projects will be profitable if managed well.

“I think these projects will be able to gain good returns. At the moment, we are main exporters of melons to Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

“This means that fruits grown locally have the potential to be marketed and sold in the local and international markets,” he said.

According to UPM vice-chancellor Datuk Dr Radin Umar Radin Sohadi, the university had received an allocation of RM2.81mil from the

Higher Education Ministry for the running of the programme.

"While the main objective of the programme is to produce excellent agripreneurs who can take up the responsibility of executing commercial agriculture projects, it will also help establish a strategic partnership between the public and private sectors.

"Additionally, the establishment of the programme will enable UPM to become a one-stop referral centre for the development of agripreneurship," he explained.

Dr Radin Umar also said that to date, five private and State Agricultural Development Corporation companies have agreed to collaborate with the university for the Agripreneur Incubator Programme.

"UPM's University Agriculture Park and Faculty of Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences will also offer their facilities to participants in the setting up of their enterprises.

"Among the sort of services offered by the companies are the rental of planting lots to participants, potential business partnerships and even employment opportunities.

"So far, 12 participants have already been offered by the companies the chance to carry out their planting of rock melons using the fertigation (a method of fertilising crops via the water irrigation system) process," he said.

Business Administration graduate Cheah Shiau Feng said that he chose to take up the crop planting module which focuses in the planting of rock melons using the fer-

tigation method.

"I picked this module because the foreign demand for rock melons from countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong has been increasing every year — this shows that there is great potential for the crop.

"Fertigation can help overcome the lack of adequate manpower (for farming the crop) in Malaysia.

"The process can also be done continuously so that produce can be exported to foreign countries during their winter seasons," said the 24-year-old.

Cheah added that he was grateful for the in-depth knowledge given by the programme lecturers.

"The university also invites successful entrepreneurs who are using the fertigation method to share their experiences with us," he said.

Another programme participant, Jebat Putra Mohd, 26, said that the course was a step forward in achieving his business goals.

"I have always been interested in entrepreneurship because it helps me think critically," said Jebat, who has qualifications in both Information Technology and Business Administration.

"I specifically enrolled in this programme to explore new business possibilities in the field of agriculture.

"It's also good to be in this new environment, as it enables me to gain knowledge and the opportunity to network with others."



Outdoor learning. Participants learning about the importance of water quality monitoring.



Real world experience: Students getting first-hand knowledge on how to manage a fish farm in Temerloh, Pahang.