

# Student athletes recognised

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PURSUING a tertiary degree while being a national athlete is probably not an easy task.

But 196 students proved that it was possible to maintain their academic excellence and athletic endeavours at the same time.

They were honoured at the Higher Education Institutions' Sporting Excellence Award 2015 ceremony held recently.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh was on hand to present RM300,000 worth of incentives to the athletes.

The award is an appreciation of the dedication and sacrifices of these student athletes who put Malaysia on the map in three international championships held last year and in 2015.

The three competitions included the World University Championship (WUC) 2014, the Asean University Games (AUG) 2014 and the World University Games (UNIVERSIADE) 2015.

Archer Saritha Cham Nong was the highest achiever taking home RM6,000.

She won one gold medal in AUG 2014 in Palembang, Indonesia and one silver medal at WUC 2014 in Legnica, Poland.

Meanwhile, swimmer Khoo Cai Lin took home RM4,250 for obtaining two golds, two silvers and one bronze medal during AUG 2014.

Idris congratulated the athletes, saying that the ministry hoped to develop "thinking athletes" who not only excelled in sports but also academically.

"We want athletes who can think and benefit the community," he said.

He cited Khoo, who is currently pursuing a double degree in public relations and marketing, and Saritha, who is studying human development, as examples.

Idris added that the award does not only entail monetary incentives but was also a means of showing their appreciation to the athletes for putting the country on the map in the international sporting arena.

"In the previous SEA Games held in Singapore, more than 60% of Malaysia's

medals were won by our students," he said.

The aim, he added, is to be the overall champions in the upcoming AUG in Singapore next year.

Saritha, who is currently studying at Universiti Putra Malaysia, said that an athlete needs to be good in dividing their time to be successful athletically and academically.

"For example, if I have a class in the morning, I'll train in the afternoon," said the 27-year-old.

She would spend two hours per day to train but would skip it if she had classes both in the morning and afternoon.

The seventh semester student said she would sometimes enlist the help of friends to help her with her studies, adding that her family has been very supportive.

"I did not expect the award as there are many athletes who have performed well too," she said.

When asked about her plans for the future, Saritha explained that she would continue archery for as long as she can.

"I'll carry on with my training and prepare for future games," she said.

Khoo, who is hoping to qualify for the Rio Olympics in 2016, has opted to pursue her studies part-time at Taylor's University Lakeside Campus.

Currently in her eighth semester, the 26-year-old expressed happiness in receiving her incentive, adding that preparations for the olympics have been going well.

Training four to five hours a day six times a week, she admitted that juggling swimming and studies has not been easy.

"I have to pick classes that start at a certain time so that I can balance my swimming and the classes," she said.

While some athletes are studying part-time, there are others who have temporarily put it on hold to focus on qualifying for bigger sporting events.

Badminton player Zulfadli Zulkiffli, 22, who is a sports science student at Universiti Teknologi Mara in Shah Alam, said that he has deferred two semesters and plans to continue his studies after the olympics.

"I hope I can do well in badminton," he said, adding that he has his heart set on qual-



**Well done:** Idris (centre) with Khoo and Saritha (fourth and sixth from right, standing) together with the other athletes after receiving their incentives at the ceremony. — SAMUEL ONG/The Star

ifying for the olympics.

"I have two to three tournaments per month," he said.

The international tournaments, he added, allow him to collect points to qualify for the olympics.

Ranked 39th in the world, Zulfadli trains three hours both in the morning and after-

noons. Sometimes he said there is an additional two hour session at night.

"My family are my biggest supporters," said the shuttler, adding that his fans and friends have also been supportive.

Zulfadli said that he would like to be a doctor specialising in sports if he was not playing badminton.