

## COVER STORY

# Varsity blues: Finding the right fit

ZULITA MUSTAFA  
zulita@nst.com.my

**W**ITH the number of public and private universities growing considerably since the early 90s, prospective students are spoilt for choice when deciding on a university.

In Malaysia, there is a total of 20 public universities and 45 private universities. In addition, there are seven foreign universities which have a branch campus in Malaysia and another 20 university colleges.

As the education sector grows, more colleges or universities will be established to offer numerous study options with a variety of courses and degree programmes for prospective students.

So what do students look for when deciding on which university to enrol in?

Based on a recent interview, it was found that the top three factors that will eventually influence the final decision of the prospective students are the university's reputation [which include its ranking], programmes it offers and facilities at the campus.

"When I was checking out several colleges, I focused on the majors and the subjects offered while at the same time considering my capabilities," said Hoo Jo Ann, a Bachelor of Business Administration (dual major) student, who is majoring in International Business & Management, a collaborative programme between US-based Northwood University and INTI International College Subang.

Hoo's college mate Aaron Loo Zhi Jian, said he wished there was a platform for former students to share their feedback and comments on the courses for future students to refer to.

"When I enrolled in the Northwood University programme four years ago, I got a lot of feedback from the lecturers and counsellors before deciding on the course.

"However, I lacked feedback from actual students who had successfully graduated from the course. Gaining first-hand insights from past graduates would definitely provide a better perspective for potential students," said the dual major Business Administration (majoring in Marketing & Management) student.

Considering the overall campus facilities and environment is also important, Loo believes that a university should provide comfortable classrooms and libraries to ensure that students will have access to course materials and a user-friendly environment throughout their campus life.

UCSI University medical student Wong Jian Yao said: "The campus should be conducive enough to offer a stress-free studying environment for the students as well."

University of Malaya Science Faculty undergraduate in Mathematics Muhammad Izzat Fitri Ahmad Baharudin, said: "If a university has a good reputation but does not offer the course that



Interacting with friends from different races and religions will widen your knowledge and social network.



Aaron Loo Zhi Jian



Shatesh Kumar Sangar



Muhammad Izzat Fitri Ahmad Baharudin

**I believe in having a positive learning attitude and always wanting to learn new things."**

**WONG JIAN YAO**  
UCSI University medical student

I'm interested in, then I will be looking at other universities. Since I'm enrolled at the best university in Malaysia, I am putting my best effort to contribute to its reputation."

Nurin Jazlina Samsu Baharin, also from UM, said she wished she knew more of the subjects for the course she has chosen.

"A deciding factor for me, would be the good reputation of the university and also if it offers the course that I'm interested in. A good reputation is an advantage for their students after they graduate. "One could probably search the topics and subjects one will learn to decide if the course is best for you.

"Sometimes not all universities offer the chosen course, so we must take this aspect into consideration," said the economics degree student.

For Leelhani Yuneska Abd Karim, she would also consider the ranking of the institution — specifically the ranking of the programme at the university — when making the right choice.

"I had no idea what wayang kulit or Mak Yong and all the Malay traditional theatres and dances were, and there were times when I thought I should have taken a different course. But since I love drama and dance I am willing to face any obstacles throughout my studies as this will motivate me to work hard," said Leelhani.

She said leaving her hometown in Sabah to study Drama in UM has been a game changer for her. Universiti Putra Malaysia undergraduate in Petroleum Chemistry Shatesh Kumar Sangar said pursuing a degree locally was her main concern as she thought she was not ready to go through her undergraduate years in a foreign country.

"But before selecting my course, I looked at the availability of elective subjects, and how it could bring me to further my studies at a postgraduate level.

"Studying at a local university is the best option to learn and become more matured along the way," she said.

She added that while good reputation and credibility are criteria to look out for whenever someone is planning to enter a college or a

university, other factors also play an important part in the decision-making.

## LIFE ON CAMPUS

When it comes to selecting a university, campus life is an important factor for many students. While getting a top quality education is the main focus, you also need time to socialise and make new friends as well as take part in extracurricular activities to have a balanced campus life.

Prospective students should also take some time before applying to find out about the student organisations, special interest clubs, as well as other campus activities.

Hoo feels that being at INTI is an interesting experience, especially being a girl who was brought up in a small town in Perak. "At campus, I get to see each individual's sense of fashion and the way they express themselves. No two are ever alike. The campus culture is honestly filled with creativity," she said.

Loo said the campus culture at INTI International College Subang is vibrant as almost every other week, he sees different events and activities being planned not only by the faculties, but also by the students. "Such events bring out the spirit of togetherness and enthusiasm as students from different programmes

are able to participate and create a fun environment together. This is what campus life should be and choosing the right university that offers cultural diversity helps to make life easier all year round."

Muhammad Izzat Fitri, on the other hand, said being able to carry out your own projects will teach you how to find sponsorship, with a little help from the university, of course. "It's important to have a campus life surrounded with activities, programmes, projects, and symposiums.

"It keeps students proactive and gives us a chance to forget about stress for a while and enjoy life," echoed Leelhani Yuneska.

Shatesh said joining different organisations and learning to become leaders is an important part

of campus life.

"I am able to do so as I enjoy using the recreational facilities, participating in competitions, and making friends of different races and courses," said Shatesh, who is also the UPM Student Council vice-president.

Choosing the right university also means you have to look at the multi-cultural atmosphere.

Wong said the presence of different cultures in the campus would open students' eyes.

"Students will comprehend the existing cultural barrier and learn to tackle the issue. This could prevent culture shock at the workplace in the future or if they decide to work abroad.

"I believe in having a positive learning attitude and always wanting to learn new things. On campus, you have to be an outgoing person and be willing to meet new friends in order to widen your social network and build up connections for your future work life," he added.

Hoo also described students at her campus in Subang as mostly friendly and helpful despite the language barrier.

"I would say they always put their best foot forward on campus." "A diverse group of students is actually a pretty good thing for us because it exposes us to different backgrounds and cultures. There are plenty of international students who come from interesting countries like the Maldives, Russia, and many others. There are many students who have a keen entrepreneurial spirit and also students who are more reserved.

This mix of students provides learning opportunities that would enable each one to successfully gain an invaluable university experience," agreed Loo.

Having had the chance to experience campus



Students enjoying a well-equipped library.

life for a few years, Muhammad Izzat Fitri said some students prefer to not join any activities and focus on studying only, while some students want to join the student councils to make changes for the benefit of other students.

"Not to forget, the international students could befriend the local students because it's good to have friends from other countries with different culture or knowledge."

## PREPARING FOR A JOB

Will the university of your choice prepare you for a job in the job market? It is natural for prospective students to be concerned about what's next after graduation.

Finding the right university that provides the right industry linkages and with a strong alumni network is key.

Muhammad Izzat Fitri said he wished he knew the careers that are related to his choice of studies, and also if the market for this career is in demand in future or otherwise.

Being in his final semester, Loo can say that the university has prepared him for the working world well, and he is confident to secure a good job once he graduates.

"My course not only teaches basic academic skills, but also exposes students to practical

## Developing soft skills

INTI International University & Colleges senior student counsellor Amy Wong said for students to qualify into universities with good rankings, it's important for them to show that they have a good balance of academic qualifications, as well as an active participation in extracurricular activities in school.

Wong said joining clubs and societies or representing their universities in competitions, forums or events indicates a well-rounded individual who is able to do well both in the classroom and outside of it.

She also said for many students, good reputation, track record as well as good academic support and programmes that match their interests are among the key factors they consider when choosing universities or colleges.

"Good facilities in campus and value-for-money are also high among the things they consider," she added.

"With today's Gen Z learners who place a great deal of importance in their ability to secure jobs when they graduate, a good institution must also be able to provide a curriculum that is both recognised and provides students with the skills and knowledge they need when entering the workplace."

She believes in having a vibrant campus life as today's generation of learners are hyper-connected and are exposed to new ideas almost every day so it's important to tap into their curiosity and willingness to learn.

"For example, promoting active clubs and societies on campus, providing opportunities for students to meet and learn from captains of industry as well as participate in competitions both locally and internationally to develop the



Amy Wong

personality and capabilities of our students.

"Students look for a combination of factors, apart from vibrant campus life, such as international exposure through recognised programmes and good academic support. They opt for institutions with good track records in ensuring their graduates are well employed when they complete their studies," said Wong.

UCSI University Student Development & Counseling Department head Megala Chandra Sakeran said apart from academic, resources which includes support services such as student activities, counseling services, sport facilities, programmes, engagement with alumni and students' overall experience on campus also plays an important role in helping them to improve their self-development.

"Students' involvement in clubs and organisations help them to enhance their soft skill such as leadership, critical and creative thinking skills, communication and interpersonal skills as well as help the students to prepare for their future career.

"Apart from enhancing their potential and skills, it's important for the students to understand their psychological well-being by consulting counsellors to enhance their self-development," said Megala.

According to her, sport facilities also play an important role in maintaining and improving students' physical health as personality is consisted of the body-mind connection.

"Facilities such as gym, swimming pools, sports equipments and others not only prepare students to maintain a healthy lifestyle but create bonding with other students as well."

learning. We collaborate with companies like Maybank and Zalora for employer projects which enhance our soft skills to benefit us when we enter the working world."

Leelhani said her faculty encourages her and her classmates to join productions from day one and they even from time to time volunteer for shows and events, which "indirectly gives us the contacts and opportunities for work later on".

Nurin Jazlina said universities don't actually spoonfeed you to become successful, but are more of a platform to prepare you and ensure you learn and compete with others to become successful. She said through that journey, whether you fail or not, you still gain something.

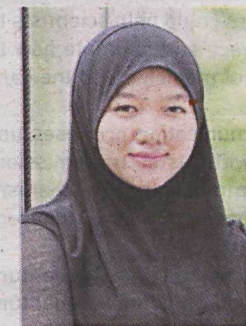
Another way to prepare oneself for the job market is to enhance or empower one's soft skills, especially communication skills. Shatesh said there are various programmes that have been organised by universities such as Career Expo to introduce and prepare students to face working life.

"It helps me tremendously to identify suitable jobs and working places. There are also some special workshops on how to write resumes and sit for job interviews."

## RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

"Final year students write their own research papers with the help of their lecturer," said Nurin Jazlina. So getting experience in doing research work is essential when one enters university. The right university will be able to provide you with the right kind of experience you would hope for.

Although the research process is practically similar at all universities, eventually, how a student



Leelhani Yuneska Abd Karim

approaches or works on it varies from one another.

"I have gained much research experience throughout my study years. Each individual has his or her own approach towards their research projects and it all depends on how much you are willing to commit towards it."

She added that the time spent on meeting supervisors, doing field work and writing the thesis make all the difference.

"But I can safely say that INTI provides a solid platform for students to learn the essence of a research paper. If students can commit their time and effort into their projects, they would be able to get genuine research experience," said Loo.

Muhammad Izzat Fitri feels he has made the right choice as most of the lecturers in UM have a PhD from outstanding universities such as University of Cambridge and New York University.

"I'm sure that I will get valuable experience doing research under the supervision of my lecturers. Leelhani said her field of study itself is a never-ending research. "We go to the rural areas not only to watch and ask questions on the rituals and dances, but we also join in to get the feel and experience ourselves."

"I believe campus life should be about student-centred learning where lectures emphasise on the topics to be covered while the details of that particular topic shall be further discovered by students themselves," said Wong.

He said students should be independent and able to understand the topics through their own effort via some research work instead of only through the explanation of their lecturer in the classroom.