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STUDYING at a university in a foreign country, even for a short while, can bring a host of benefits to a student. Whether under a mobility, undergraduate or postgraduate programme, students should seize the opportunity to not only improve their academic, but also gain different perspectives, and immerse in different cultures and lifestyles, as it would give them a better world view.

This was the message laid out by Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) Putra International Centre director Associate Professor Dr Zelina Zaiton Ibrahim at the ice-breaking session during the New International Students Welcoming Programme 2017/2018 for the varsity's international students recently.

The three-day programme comprised a three-day orientation for 141 students, of which 46 are in mobility programmes, 58 undergraduate and 37 post-graduate students. This involved campus familiarisation, a tour of Kuala Lumpur and a visit to Melaka for a taste of the nation's heritage. They were accompanied by representatives of the UPM Buddies Association.

Zelina said the total number of international students at UPM, including those who registered in previous semesters, were about 900.

"Most students here are mobility students. There are 400 students under the category, half of whom are from China. The Chinese government has a policy encouraging students to undergo study stints outside of China for four months. The course they undergo will be transferred into credits for their programmes when they go home," she said.

"We also encourage Malaysian students to do this. The government has a scheme for public universities called the Asian Internationality Mobility Students, where students are encouraged to go for mobility programmes in Asean countries. There is an agreement, managed under SEAMEO (Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organisation), which emulates what is done in Erasmus Mundus in Europe, where students are encouraged to move around the region as a way to integrate."

As a common community, she said, students in an Asean member nation could go to other Asean countries for one semester for the same programme that they are taking in their home country.

"At the moment, UPM invites Asean students under Agriculture, Food Science, Economics and Tourism programmes to come, and credit transfer will apply. It will be stated in their transcripts that the course was done in the country the student went to during that four weeks," said Zelina.

Mobility programmes in UPM offered a good balance of what Malaysia was like, said Zelina.

"We are close to Kuala Lumpur, but the setting is more of the rural kind."

Asked about fraudulent foreign students who came to the country under the pretense of studying, Zelina said there had been no such incident in UPM.

"Before international students come to UPM, we screen their certificates. Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS), an agency under the Higher Education Ministry, can verify the certificates submitted by international students through its system. And, foreign students have to go through the Immigration Department to gain their student visas before coming



Nurul Zafirah
Awang Mahli



Afiq Nuradli Amin
Abdul Nasir



Students participating in an ice-breaking session during the New International Students Welcoming Programme 2017/2018 at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang. PIC BY ROSELA ISMAIL

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Study stint in a foreign country



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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DR ZELINA ZAITON IBRAHIM
UPM Putra International Centre director

here," she said.

She said there had been cases where the same certificate was used by various individuals to apply for student visas, but they were detected and their applications rejected by the authorities.

"If there are cases of such incidents, EMGS will notify universities and tell them to reexamine the applications. The decision whether a student enters the country is up to the Immigration Department," she said.

"Once students enter the country, we require them to undergo medical check-ups. If there are illnesses that are contagious, the student need to return home. And, we track their exam results. If we find that they have not been attending classes, we will issue a warning letter and if that is ignored, we will cancel their pass and have the student sent back," she said.

At the programme, 19 UPM buddies were present. Buddies are student volunteers who welcome and help new students get familiar to the campus lifestyle, and also to be their friend. One buddy is assigned to a maximum of five new international students.

Afiq Nuradli Amin Abdul Nasir, 24, director of the UPM Buddies Association, said being a buddy allowed students to meet people from different cultures.

"I am not an outgoing person, but I challenge myself to interact with people outside my comfort zone. This is the second time I am participating in a welcoming programme and being a buddy," said the second-year Bachelor of Arts in English Linguistics student.

"We will do our best for the programme. Being a buddy is not for this three-day duration only. We will try to organise more activities for international students beyond the wel-

coming programme."

Asseel Hisham, 22, from Palestine, who is a third-year Bachelor in Biotechnology student, had been a buddy for three intakes.

"UPM has a strong reputation where I come from. It is known for its strength in academic and industrial knowledge, and UPM's qualification is recognised in Palestine. I am doing Biotechnology with genetic engineering research.

"When I first came here, I was very shy. Now, I appreciate the different cultures and the variety of nationalities here on campus," she said.

New arrival Pascal Lefarth, 21, from Germany, is attending a mobility programme at UPM and will be attending classes at the Faculty of Engineering.

"I got to know about the mobility programme through a group called Malaysia Exchange on social media. I am an Industrial Engineering student at Ostfalia Wolfenbüttel. The programme is a mix of economics and engineering. I focus on environmental issues.

"This is my first time in Malaysia. I wanted to go to an English-speaking country to improve my English, but the cost of living in the

United States is high. UPM has many faculties, and it provides opportunities to learn about other cultures and Asia. After my studies, I'll have two-and-half months for internship or holiday," he said.

Nurul Zafirah Awang Mahli, 21, from Brunei, meanwhile, is in UPM for her internship at the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences.

"My stint is from January to April. I am a Biomedical Science undergraduate at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. I chose to come to UPM because it is near to home and the culture is not too different from ours in Brunei," she said.



Pascal Lefarth



Asseel Hisham