

## Cover story

# More than academic programmes

Universiti Putra Malaysia has developed summer school courses to enable local and international students to explore new experiences.

By SANDHYA MENON  
educate@thestar.com.my

ANYTHING but studying, is a common thought most varsity students express when the topic of summer vacation comes up.

After all, they can't be blamed for thinking that way after sitting through months of intense lessons and examinations.

However, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Faculty of Environmental Studies Assoc Prof Zelina Zaiton Ibrahim feels students could instead enrol themselves into summer school programmes to expedite their learning process or even to take up additional courses.

"As part of our efforts towards internationalisation and enhancing the educational experience, UPM began providing its students with overseas education opportunities since 2009. We also bring international students to UPM to experience our teaching methodologies.

"Since then, we developed the programmes into a more structured and organised manner for local and international students," adds Assoc Prof Zelina, who is also UPM summer school programme director.

UPM deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International) Prof Iqbal Saripan says the idea struck them when the university compared itself to current summer programmes practised in Europe or in the United States (US).

"For students in the west, summer break is an opportunity to explore new experience in different environments and challenges.

"The mobility between US and Europe is already a common practice, but now we want to attract them to come to this part of the world.

"We suggested a two to three week duration because it can't be too short or too long.

"(International) participants will not be able to capture the real Malaysian experience in too short a period, whereas too long a duration will incur higher cost to students," he adds.

The programmes involves 16 faculties and

**Prioritising student-centred learning, the programmes are balanced with academic components, which comes with activities and experiential learning, as well as a social and cultural component.**

Assoc Prof  
Zelina Zaiton Ibrahim



offers 19 programmes.

Prioritising student-centred learning, the programmes are balanced with academic components which comes with activities and experiential learning, as well as a social and cultural component, Prof Zelina shares.

"We don't want our summer programme to be conducted similar to that of a classroom setting.

"So, we incorporated plenty of presentation, field work, going to labs and sites, depending on the specialisation of the faculty.

"For the Faculty of Forestry for example, participants stay in the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve Puchong, where chalets are provided.

"They will do all kinds of activities from jungle trekking to identification of plants and learning survival skills."

It is a concoction of the educational aspect of forestry as a subject as well as ensuring students understand the value of forests and its products.

Experiences like this, Assoc Prof Zelina says,

especially for international students who may not have travelled to tropical countries, will prove to be a very different adventure.

Prof Iqbal says the programme targets international students as the varsity wishes to increase its international visibility.

"We believe it (will create) a domino effect whereby as UPM's visibility increases (on an international platform), so will the country's," he adds.

However, although originally designed for international students, Assoc Prof Zelina emphasises that there are no restrictions placed.

Malaysian students can sign up for the programme and will play a role akin to that of a facilitator.

They will help international students settle down and educate them on the Malaysian culture, she adds.

"This way, it opens our students' eyes as well; they will become more confident and it will bring out their leadership qualities.

"Non-students who want to gain some experience, can join the faculties involved too.

"In addition, it provides a platform for Malaysian students to build on their networking and confidence in working with international students, keeping the communication barrier in mind.

"It is a learning by doing experience for both group of students and it allows lecturers to teach in a different style, moving away from the normal classroom teaching methods," she says.

Beyond gaining academic knowledge and developing soft skills, the programme aims to build networks between the participants which will come in handy in their

## Faculty of Bio technology and Biomolecular Sciences

Here, the programme will be tweaked to offer 'local flavours'.

It's molecular and structural biochemist lecturer Normi Mohd Yahaya says local content such as exposing students to the methods of making tempeh will be introduced into its programme.

"Students will also be challenged to extract DNA from fruits, particularly local ones.

"Some would yield good DNA after extraction, so we feel this would sparks participants' curiosity.

"The faculty's strength

also lies on using renewable materials, particularly oil palm biomass, and turning them into value added products like bio diesel," she adds.

Normi says as the varsity has a bio compost plant, participants will be exposed to the methods of preparing biodiesel from renewable biomass.

It is a combination of theoretical learning and its application through hands on learning in the lab, as well as site visits, she shares.

Plans in the pipeline include collaborating with the forensic depart-

ment to expose students on how analysis is done and how to determine who carried out a crime, for instance.

From fascinating components as such, students will be exposed to the practical components of biotech.

"Two to three weeks will be sufficient for them to absorb everything because we have tailored the module in a focused and specialised method."

## Faculty of Forestry

As its name suggests, the faculty will focus on nature, offering students an interesting track through its Tropical Forest Trail.

Senior lecturer Nor Akmar Abdul Aziz says students will be introduced to forestry skills through a variety of activities including forest survival, learning of different herbs and ferns, and outdoor activities.

"The program will expose them to the importance of forest for society and the world at large.

"It will be conducted by experts in the respective areas," she adds. Interestingly, students will have the opportunity to stay in the forest in the chalets provided to obtain the best experience.

Nor Akmar says she hopes students will develop key skills such as confidence and communication by the end of the programme.

For more information on the courses offered by UPM for its summer school, visit its website at [http://www.intlupm.edu.my/mobility/inbound/summer\\_programme4091](http://www.intlupm.edu.my/mobility/inbound/summer_programme4091)

## Faculty of Economics and Management

Imagine being taught by experts at Bursa Malaysia on how to do real life trade through games and talks, and getting first hand exposure from the Malaysian Palm Oil Board on how palm oil is made.

We want students to also see what a palm oil plantation is like, adds senior lecturer Adilah Abd Razak.

"We have devised a three-in-one course for students under the summer school programme, combining three of our programmes; economics, accounting and business administration.

"Through this, we want participants to be able to create a network as future business leaders.

"Culture is important for business. If you don't understand culture, you will not be able to expand into a big business," she shares.

The programme further looks to equip students with skills involving communication and bridging language barriers.

The ability to link with students who can't speak fluently in a certain language to express their thoughts is important, Adilah adds.



'BioTrek - The Life Science Experience', will provide students with problem-solving and innovative learning skills and expose them to biotechnology, through lab activities.



Forest Trail gives participants a chance to learn forestry skills through a variety of activities.

### Challenges

Helen Keller once said, life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.

Similarly, Assoc Prof Zelina believes the challenges students face during the programme will help them grow as individuals, particularly where building resilience in preparation for their professional life concerns.

As the summer school programme rolled out in a more organised fashion last year, she points out it was a challenge to identify key elements each faculty had to offer that would be marketable and attractive to the students.

"We also had to ensure the cost is reasonable.

"From the accommodation to the food, we have to ensure there's enough money rolling in to continue the programme and improve our facilities for the next batch of students.

"We plan to conduct this programme annually."

With a five-year plan in mind, Prof Iqbal says it includes collaborating with neighbouring countries to have a

### Other universities

Universiti Malaya (UM), the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Monash University Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia are some of the other varsities that offer summer school programmes.

University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus International Office Student Support officer Anushia Thamotharam shares that the varsity's programmes are targeted at various audiences, from post high school groups, to undergraduates, working adults and teachers.

It provides an opportunity for the participants to learn about subject areas through activities and workshops, she adds.

Some of the courses include Politics, Culture and the Media in Southeast Asia, Doing Business in Asia and Intensive Mandarin for Beginners.

Monash University Malaysia's summer school offers programmes under four faculties; the School of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Business, School of Medicine and Health Sciences and the School of Science.

They run between November and February.

UM International Student Centre director Salmi Marsita Shaari says the benefit of a summer school programme comes in many folds.

"It adds value to a student's learning experience, gives them opportunity to gain exposure on the different living and learning environments, enhance their international understanding and cultural sensitivity and builds networks.

"It is also good training ground for the global leaders of the future," she adds.

Some of the faculties involved in UM's programme include the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty

