

# Setting the right course

ROZANA SANI  
rsani@nst.com.my

**W**ITH the announcement of the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) results last week, school-leavers are looking at education options which will shape their future.

Securing a place at a tertiary institution is a big step in advancing one's education, and the process in Malaysia begins with the submission of entry applications via the Central University Admission Unit online portal (UPUOnline) managed by the Education Ministry.

Mazula Sabudin, who is director of the student enrolment management division at the Higher Education Department, said for the 2018/2019 academic session, 166,000 places were offered via UPUOnline at 20 public universities, 36 polytechnics, 102 community colleges and four public skills training institutions (ILKAs). An increase is expected this year.

SPM school-leavers have a choice of pursuing certificate, foundation or diploma programmes at either public universities, polytechnics, community colleges or ILKAs.

For STPM school-leavers, they will be competing with matriculation, foundation and diploma graduates as well as Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia certificate holders for bachelor degree programmes.

Mazula also highlighted the ministry has established a "special" track admission to higher learning institutions and ILKAs for SPM, STPM and equivalent students. This special track was created for students from the B40 group, disabled, Orang Asli and athletes.

They do not have to compete with the mainstream group to further their studies. They only need to fulfil the special entry requirements set by the specific universities and will only be filtered among their own groups," she added. Special track candidates must meet all admission requirements required by higher learning institutions including passing specific tests or interviews.

On choice of programmes to apply, Mazula said candidates' selection of courses and universities should be based on their interest and backed by qualifications and capabilities.

"Follow your instincts and identify your passion, then you will work hard at your studies. Also plan, think ahead and choose according to your capabilities."

## SELECTION

The UPU application process kicked off on Feb 25 and will end on April 2.

The ministry implements the meritocracy principle in selecting students eligible to study at public universities. It gives 90 per cent weightage to academic achievement and the remaining to students' extracurricular accomplishment.

The selection of students is also dependent on their performance at the interview or entrance examination (for programmes such as medicine, architecture, sport science and education)," said Mazula.

The respective higher learning institutions will select candidates with the highest scores according to the programme applied for at UPUOnline. All applications are processed by a computerised system and the selections are carried out based on the availability of places at the respective institutions.

"If a student does not meet the requirement of his first choice or the places for the programme are full, the system will move to the next option according to the student's preference. The system will automatically move to the third and the process will be repeated until all the choices are processed. The

university will only select candidates who meet entry requirements and if places are available. Priority will be given to the candidate with the highest merit score."

## UNIVERSITIES

Applicants generally base their selection of courses on what they hear from friends and relatives, and the reputation as well specialisation of respective universities. But it pays to visit the university website and find out more about its programmes.

Zarina Zainol Abidin, who is Academic Administration and Services Centre director at Universiti Malaya (UM), said potential UM students must fulfil entry requirements for the programme selected and put the institution as their first choice.

"Criteria of selection is merit-based and for programmes with interviews, students must pass the faculty test and interview. If applicants fail to get an offer for any of their choices, they can appeal through UPU e-Rayuan," she said.

Universiti Sains Malaysia's (USM) unique selling point is that its bachelor's degree programmes offer students the freedom to select their minor courses according to interest.

Deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international) Professor Dr Ahmad Farhan Mohd Sadullah said this has resulted in students having unusual combinations of majors and minors.

For SPM school-leavers, the Diploma in Nursing course is the only programme which can be applied for at pohn.usm.my

Ahmad Farhan added that applicants must know their academic strength and choose the right programme in line with interest.

Rosli Wah, senior deputy registrar at the office of Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international), said that in order to stand a better chance of admission to a programme, an applicant must carefully take into account his CGPA and the competition.

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international) Professor Dr Noor Azuan Abu Osman said the institution encourages "industry in the classroom".

"UMT is the only university in the country which emphasises study of the ocean, maritime and marine environment, and we are always looking into ways to commercialise research in related fields," he said.

Potential students should go to the "Checking System" at iMASCUSU (upu.semakysarat.info) to pre-identify programmes which they are eligible to apply for.

Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) and Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) are both part of the Malaysia Technical University Network (MTUN) offering various technical higher education programmes from diploma to doctorate levels.

Mohd Nizam Pavel, UTeM senior deputy registrar at its academic management division, said the institution is cognisant of changes brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and is positioned to equip students with the knowledge and relevant skills required.

"UTeM is at the forefront of providing higher education for TVET graduates," he added.

"Applicants are advised to indicate their strongest preference in their selection of programmes. For example if they are interested in programmes offered by UTeM, then list it accordingly as top choice.



Students are rushing to gain admission to universities by applying for places at UPUOnline.

A higher qualification will increase their chances of selection as it is based on merit," said Mohd Nizam.

With a niche in sustainable technology and transportation, UTHM offers a range of engineering, applied sciences and information technology programmes for both SPM and STPM and equivalent school-leavers.

Deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international) Professor Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman said UPU issues a list of eligible applicants to UTHM after the application period ends.

"Students must make sure they fulfil all criteria. We will check the suitability of applicants and should the applicant not get an offer, they can make an appeal at UPU," he added.

## STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Iman Roslan, 19, who is in the second semester of the Foundation in TESL programme at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Dengkil, said that her application for a programme after SPM last year was quite smooth.

"I used iMASCUSU to check the courses that I was eligible to apply for. It is really helpful as it focuses on programmes that one is eligible for. iMASCUSU prevents students from making wrong choices and saves time from having to research courses which turn out to be not suitable."

Based on her interest in linguistic studies and SPM results as well as advice from friends, teachers and family members, Iman selected her courses and universities, and was successful in getting her top choice.

Former diploma programme student Aisyah Raihana Abd Razak, 22, applied for a bachelor's degree course at UPUOnline.

She based her course selections on her educational background (Diploma in TESL), interests and university location. She also visited university websites and got input from family and friends.

Aisyah Raihana is studying for a Degree in English as Intercultural Communication at UTM Shah Alam, her first choice.

"My advice is to fill in all the eight options for course and university. Make sure to fill in your information correctly and before submitting your application, check again. Be on the alert to important



Noor Azuan Abu Osman



Iman Roslan



The ministry implements the meritocracy principle in selecting students eligible to study at public universities.

MAZULA SABUDIN  
Higher Education Department student enrolment management division director



dates for example closing date, interview date and announcement of UPU results," she added.

Muhammad Farhan Mohd Farid Rozaidi, 22, who is pursuing a Bachelor of Electrical Engineering (Honours) degree course at UTHM said applicants should match their qualifications against the competition.

"My application for a bachelor's degree course was not successful the first time around. I listed Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) as my first choice and it is well-known that UTM is a favourite for engineering programmes. I made an appeal and was required to list four universities. After a discussion with my parents and based on the courses and universities suggested by the system, I put UTHM as my first choice and I got a place."

Muhammad Farhan added that diploma applicants vying to get into bachelor's degree courses compete against STPM, matriculation, foundation and diploma holders from

private universities so they must be realistic about their capabilities and apply accordingly.

Applicants need to really think about the choices they list down in their applications, said Busyra Mohamad Fauzi, 20, a first-year medical student at USM Kubang Kerian in Kelantan.

"Always check for eligibility first, for both university and course. Be extra careful when filling up information. Choose the course that you want to study, not because of your parents, friends or anyone else."

"Don't be afraid to apply to a top university, you never know your full potential. Don't hesitate to apply to not-so-popular institutions too. Don't just look at ranking as there are many aspects to consider," she said.

Busyra's coursemate Wan Nurfaizma Wan Apandi, 20, shared that she looked up

university ranking and went online to read about the experiences of others. She also asked her matriculation studies lecturers for their opinions and looked into the facilities at the universities.

"Take your time and do not rush to fill in details at UPU. Research the course since it's going to be lifelong learning."

International Islamic University Malaysia first-year student Farha Taj Rijal agrees. The Bachelor's Degree in Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage student said getting into a course one may not be interested in due to lack of care in making a choice is a terrible waste of time.

"You are the one who is going to spend your precious time there. Do not follow your friends' choices as what may be good for them is not good for you. Consider your parents' choices as well. Apply based on your competencies and results," she added.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia first-year law student Mohammad Al-Saifee Aziz Azman, 20, said applicants must be vigilant of the UPU application process after researching universities and courses, and discussions with parents and counsellors.

"I recall that there was an update after the first round of the application process. Applicants must also print and prepare UPU documents, especially the offer letter, for further evaluation by universities."

"Lastly, applicants should think their choices through before submission, find their passion and not blindly follow peers and parents, because it is a one-way ticket and once the application is submitted, there is no going back, and regret means nothing."

## PARENTAL GUIDANCE

Though the choices made during UPU applications should be based on applicants' interest and qualification, parents should also play an active role in guiding school-leavers.

Aidah Mohd Sari from Gombak, who has assisted her three children in the UPU application process, said school-leavers may be too young to understand the whole picture of how education, employment trends, job market demands and industry needs gel together.

"After SPM, for example, ask your children what they want to do. And if they are not

sure, get them to take an online psychometric test that will indicate their leanings and interests. But the children must have a reality check based on their grades and capabilities," she added.

While Aidah's children decided the programme to pursue based on their SPM or foundation studies results and interests, she advised and assisted them by visiting university websites to find information such as course content and collaboration with government agencies and industry players to choose the right university for the course selected.

Education fairs such as Education Ministry's Jom Masuk IPT carnivals give a clear picture of what is available.

"There are different types of public universities for example, research and technical universities. Not all students are suitable to study at a research university and technical universities may be more suitable for those who like hands-on experience."

"Information on industry-university collaborations too is valuable as it is generally easier for students to get job offers when they graduate as the subjects taught are relevant to the industry."

Aidah advised applicants not to wait until the 11th hour to fill up the UPU application form as the portal may be congested, resulting in the possibility of missing the deadline.

"When filling up the online application, make sure your children are 100 per cent sure before making a submission. Apply for your choice of course at various universities, not various courses in one university only. You may end up doing a course you're not interested in at all."

Aidah's son Aiman Arif Mohamed Bukhary, 26, and Amsyar Arif Mohamed Bukhary, 24, both got their preferred choice of course and university after applying through UPU. Today Aiman Arif, who studied forensic science at USM, is an internal auditor at KLCC Projects (a subsidiary of Petronas). Amsyar Arif, who studied electronic engineering, is an engineer at Intel.

Her youngest child, Aina Aneesa, who recently got her SPM results, is aiming for a course in accountancy and has submitted her application through UPU.

## TIPS

- Do a psychometric test to determine interest/passion
- Do research on universities and courses through their websites
- Find out course content at university websites
- Talk to friends and relatives about their experience and consult parents on choices
- Visit education fairs

- Consider not-so-popular institutions

- Apply for your choice of course at various universities, not various courses at one university only

- Don't wait until the 11th hour to fill up the UPU application form as the portal may be congested

- For programmes that require interview or audition in the selection process, make sure you attend it

## UPU APPLICATION PROCESS

