

Groomed for success



Adventurous: Kong (left) and Tan during their transit at Osaka before heading to Hokkaido, Japan.

While some struggle to secure work placements at home, a group of varsity students are excelling overseas

It is something of a throw-away observation to note that academic news in Malaysia is largely peninsula-centric.

So when it turns out that there are high achievers from Sarawak and Sabah, the effect is rightfully magnified.

This is certainly the case for 16 students of UCSI University, Sarawak Campus who recently secured their coveted internship at luxury hotels and resorts in Japan and Singapore.

Among them were Michele Kong and Rebecca Tan, who wrote history themselves and also for the university, when they were selected for a five-month internship at the renowned Niseko ski resort in Japan — widely regarded as one of the world's premier wintry holiday destinations.

Now entering their fourth week of internship, the two clearly felt that the exposure they'd been getting was truly invaluable.

"It's a totally different environment compared to Malaysia, down to the people's work culture and things that I learn on daily basis," enthused Tan.

"Everything happens so fast around here! I have to master the booking system, reply

emails, act promptly on feedback, offer quality service to our guests and arrange for their pick-ups, in addition to the daily grind of managing check-ins and check-outs.

"The resort itself is vast — I'm still trying to figure out how many properties Hokkaido Tracks — the company behind Niseko — really has!" she said.

Kong explained the steep learning curve she had to navigate upon her arrival at the resort, shaking off the initial jitters as it was her first time overseas on her own.

"It's quite a challenge to work with so many people from different countries; to learn from each other and to voice our opinions on various issues."

"The internship is going well for me and it is a nice change to be able to experience it in a foreign country — an extremely rare opportunity for a university student," she said.

On a lighter note, the girls were united in their views of a challenge that could not be overcome easily — Mother Nature.

Kong said the weather had been the hardest thing for her to get used to as she had never experienced snowfall before and the unforgiv-

ing temperature, which is below 0° average. Although she was slowly getting used to this, she said it would take more time to fully adapt to the changes caused by the different environment.

Similarly, Tan said she was still grappling with the vast expanse of snow that could adversely affect one's sense of direction.

"I am still unfamiliar with the many landmarks. There were times when I lost my direction during inspection of rooms at different properties in the resort. I had to radio the headquarters to get directions from my supervisor," she admitted.

"Now whenever I go out, the first question he (the supervisor) asks is whether I know the locations, and more importantly, whether I will get lost again! Funny as it is, it makes my internship here more interesting," she laughed.

Marvelling at and learning the efficiency and reliability – the two traits that are quintessentially Japanese – of their senior colleagues, both students pointed out that Hokkaido Tracks was actually Australian-owned.

"It is really impressive to see how they retain the uniqueness of Japanese culture, at the same time displaying the seemingly Australian laidback approach," Tan said.

Taking the lead from their foreign colleagues who spoke Japanese fluently, the girls signed up for language classes, a move they believed would boost their career prospects.

On this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Kong and Tan credited their alma mater for grooming them for success.

"My time in the UCSI Student Council and also the various roles I played have really prepared me for this internship as I learn how to work and play together in a team comprising individuals from different backgrounds," said Kong.

She said the learning system UCSI had also taught her how to prioritise tasks according to urgency, which had helped her at Niseko where she was required to get things done in a timely manner.

"More importantly, UCSI played an integral role in setting up this internship. The university had put us in touch with Hokkaido Tracks and I would not have known about Niseko without their assistance," said Kong.

The positive experiences of the two girls are

shared by their 14 friends who are currently away on six-month internship at premium hotel chains in Singapore like Wyndham Group Hotel, Marina Mandarin Hotel, Movenpick Hotel and Resort Sentosa, as well as the Conrad Centennial Singapore Hotel.

UCSI Sarawak chief operating officer Lu Huang Ying said such experience would boost her students' employability and raise the aspirations of their peers.

"The university endeavours to give its students wholesome hospitality education through unique placements like those in Singapore and Japan.

"Exposure at such companies will equip our students with the business acumen of the global economy and they will learn to appreciate different business cultures and perspectives. This will serve them well in their future careers as they develop into global citizens who are competent and capable," she noted.

The achievements of UCSI's students have added credence to the role that the university is playing towards reshaping domestic tourism and hospitality industry through education.

Despite being the fifth largest contributor to the Malaysian economy, only around 16% of workers in the industry possess the minimum qualification of a diploma or a degree.

To match the industry's projected growth, the Government has highlighted the need to raise the statistics to 20% and as a result, the Malaysian Centre for Tourism and Hospitality Education (MyCenTHE) was set.

Led by UCSI, MyCenTHE – a coalition involving some of Malaysia's foremost public and private higher education providers – is on track for a full national roll-out by 2020. Four clusters are currently operational in Sarawak, Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Sabah.

As the first successful cluster of MyCenTHE, it is somewhat fitting that UCSI Sarawak's is getting its time in the spotlight.

It has attracted foreign students from developed countries like Germany, Denmark and Canada, among others, in recent years and the trend is set to continue through student and staff exchange programmes.

And with more student achievements on the cards, the university is showing that Malaysia's appeal as a preferred education hub extends far beyond the Klang Valley.