

[The Star Online](#) > Education

Sunday November 22, 2009

Heading in the right direction

By RICHARD LIM

A recent camp for student heads reinforced the need to be courteous and fair in tackling and resolving simple and serious issues faced by their peers.

LOST in their world of organising events, responding to grouses and corresponding with IPT administrators, student leaders are a tough lot to pin down.

However, there wasn't a need for any coercing when the inaugural Nilai University College (Nilai) – Higher Education Ministry Future Leaders' Camp was announced.



Bawa's speech emphasised sensitivity and it was well-received by the student leaders.

Themed “Cultural Relations: Leading in Solidarity”, the three-day and two-night camp saw 150 student leaders from private IPTs nationwide coming together at the swanky new Nilai Springs Hotel and Golf Resort.

The sun was out and with the lush greens, clear skies and no classroom in sight for miles – except for Nilai and INTI University students – the student leaders had a field day learning more about each other and themselves.

Common ground

While the question “Where am I?” was a non-issue, “Who am I” was something some were grappling with. And who could blame them?

The passion for identity is innate, and the latter has been a burning question which many struggle to answer with any degree of accuracy.

And with 60 international student leaders from 24 countries, there was some reconciliation to do. Some students had a hard time coming out of their shells and common ground had to be established.



SUIT UP: Assisted by her 'volunteers', Lee laid down the law when it came to dressing.

Enter one Prof Datuk Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, who did just that when he spoke about cultural identity.

“Everyone in this room wants to be a leader, and that is your similarity,” said the founding director of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s Institute of Ethnic Studies.

“Culture is a complex system of norms, meanings and symbols. Shared values are necessary for it to exist.”

Giving unique Malaysian examples, Prof Shamsul talked about how diverse cultures could coexist in harmony. This was an eye opener for some international participants – and a few locals.

“The Nyonya, Baba and Peranakan are the epitome of social mixing in Malaysia,” he enthused. “They’re good examples of people who come to Malaysia, settle down and adapt to the way of life.

“They retain and share their culture in the process.

As a result, everyone is enriched. We cannot equate unity to uniformity and the trick is to find a balance between the different cultures.”



DELIRIUM: The student leaders having a blast during a night session at the camp.

He added that people should not adopt a tunnel vision approach as the challenges stemming from cultural diversity are coupled

with unique advantages.

Prof Shamsul highlighted the tourism industry as a country's many cultural differences often makes it more "sellable" to tourists.

A realignment of focus was then stressed and the student leaders were reminded to look at uniting factors rather than issues which come across as a divisive wedge.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Picking up where Prof Shamsul left off, the World Council of Religious Leaders secretary-general Bawa Jain zeroed in on the concepts of respect and understanding.

Well travelled due to his work with the United Nations, Bawa started by relating his personal experience at an Asian airport where he was stopped at security.

"The security personnel were suspicious as I had a thick passport," he shared. "They were not courteous until I showed them proof that I was a guest of their government.

"The treatment changed but the explanation I got was, 'Sorry, I thought you were Osama'. Is it my fault that I look Middle Eastern?"

According to Bawa, what constitutes a leader is not the success one achieves but the degree of respect and acceptance the public ascribes to him or her.

And how does one command respect?



EMOTIONALLY CHARGED: Although nothing got out of hand, conjectures and refutations could be a tad intense.

Well, listening — and not adopting a condescending holier-than-thou attitude — would be a good place to start.

And when the opportunity to act comes, good leaders should be prepared to get their hands dirty; otherwise all the lofty rhetoric would remain mere lip service.

Firing a broadside at the distorting prism of stereotyping, Bawa said that different people of all groups had the universal right to be understood and respected, regardless of their history, race or religion.

"There isn't a clash of civilizations but a clash of cultures," he said. "The ignorance of lumping people together is an obduracy of

the most perverse kind.

“You can’t omit the dynamic interaction between religions and culture by basing ideas solely on conflict.”

Adding that the failure of leadership often stems from prejudices, Bawa encouraged the students to apply what they had learnt during the camp.

“The camp is important but what you take home is even more important,” he said.

The size is right

Although the talks were inspiring, the less metaphysically-inclined had their hands full grappling with the issues. They got some reprieve in the lighthearted session after, which was on etiquette and image.

Facilitated by professional image consultant Wendy Lee, the session had the students in bouts of laughter — even though the joke was on them at times.

“We live in a fast-paced world and first impressions are formed within seconds,” she quipped.



SISTER ACT: Sherine and Jeslyn having a fun time brainstorming.

“The way we dress and our body language are giveaways to our character and personality.”

Elaborating further, Lee expounded on a University of Pittsburgh research, which looked at the correlation between attractiveness and career growth of 700 MBA graduates over a decade.

The graduates were ranked on a scale of one (least attractive) to five (most attractive) and the study found a direct correlation between attractiveness and career success – which was defined by starting salary, the number of promotions and increments.

Driving home her point, Lee got “volunteers” on stage to demonstrate the proper way to dress. To the delight of her audience, Lee scrutinised their every fine detail – body types, colour matching, and the degree of professionalism, among others.

And while the women had few problems – if any – the same could not be said for the men who squirmed uncomfortably on stage as Lee fiddled with their collars and raised the breaks of their pants to check the colour of their socks.

It wasn’t all for laughs, however, and Lee got serious when she coached the student leaders to make a good impression.

“Eye contact is very important,” she said. “It’s more complex than it sounds. You have to know when to look, where to look and

how long to look without blinking too much or getting distracted by the environment.

“Also, one’s body language and posture is very important. Be careful not to intrude into one’s personal space – the 18-inch distance – and be firm and steady as it shows that you’re giving attention to someone.”

Waxing lyrical

As with any event, the students came with varying motivations but at the end of the day, it’s safe to say that all of them left satisfied.

“It has been an awesome experience,” said Nilai Student Representative Council president Philip Emokpare, who hails from Nigeria.

“I came here to learn how to be a better leader and I picked up many good points. Prof Shamsul’s talk encouraged us to accept others for their diversity and we can find true meaning by appreciating other cultures and sensitivities.”

He added he was better prepared to handle diversity as the university had a significant foreign student cohort from 40 countries.

On the other hand, sisters Sherine Tan Sui Hua, 19, and Jeslyn Tan Sui Mei, 18, came with open minds and they were pleasantly surprised by the experience.

“I’ve learnt how to analyse situations better and I appreciate critical issues more,” said Sherine, who is Nilai’s British Degree Programme Society president.

“Issues like cultural diversity were not important to me in the past but I want to understand them now.”

Meanwhile, her younger sister who studies Psychology at HELP University College related her many cultural exchanges.

“I had Zimbabwean and Nigerian students in my group and I liked how we could discuss our cultural differences openly,” she said.

“We explained why we remove our shoes as a sign of respect, our usage of *lah* and *mah* when we speak English, as well as the way our societies are structured.”

Jeslyn’s view was shared by Universiti Teknologi Petronas’ Petroleum Engineering student Nuruddeen Korsem, 19, who comes from Thailand.

“Many of us had culture shocks initially,” he said. “Auspicious things may be a taboo in different cultures. For example, red symbolises wealth for the Chinese but it means death in some African cultures.”

And for others like Ton Minh Tuan, 21, who studies Business Administration at HELP, the camp was a process of self-discovery and a panacea to bad habits.

“I was very quiet and introverted before this camp,” he said. “I didn’t like shaking hands and I don’t know how I’m the vice-president of the Vietnamese Student Council.

“I’ve improved my communication skills through this camp and I’m a more complete individual now.”

More about the camp

Organised by Nilai administrators, the inaugural Future Leaders Camp received the endorsement of the Higher Education

Ministry, who sponsored the event.

The first such event involving student leaders from private IPTs, the camp was intended to hone leadership skills and foster greater cultural understanding.

“This is a new approach employed by the ministry to address various challenges in higher education,” said Nilai president Prof Emeritus Tengku Datuk Shamsul Bahrin in his welcome address.

“We’re happy that the private sector is playing a more poignant role and we’re encouraged to collaborate more with the ministry.”

This summed up the general feel of the participants. Many remarked that the good international presence showed that the camp lived up to its theme and the foreign students felt that their input was valued.

Other speakers at the camp include ministry director Karim Jaafar and Tunku Ali Redhaudhin Tuanku Muhriz, the Tunku Besar Seri Menanti of Negeri Sembilan.

The student leaders were also given a dose of the Dale Carnegie Leadership Training in communication and people skills.

Now, there are times when you get caught up in the moment and imagine, with all the detachment you can muster, that what you have witnessed was very special.

The inaugural Future Leaders Camp was once such event, and with the overwhelming response, one can only hope that it will become an annual affair.