Monetary aid for best candidates

An established foundation has a novel way of selecting the right persons for its scholarships.

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Imagine that you are at an interview, and you are ushered into a room with a group of your fellow interviewees.

In the room, there is a box on a table and you are given no further instruction, save perhaps that the interviewer will address your group after a period of time. What do you do?

According to Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD) governing council member Tan Sri Dr Wan Mohd Zahid Mohd Noordin, your actions may determine whether you are awarded a scholarship or not.

He explains that the unorthodox selection process is one of the many tests YSD Excellence Scholarship applicants undergo to determine their leadership qualities.

"The box just contains discussion topics that the interviewees have to present — we want to see how students react to the situation, and give them marks for their initiative and participation.

"Candidates also have to present case studies; and I have seen straight-A students completely failing at these engagement methods.

"So it's not just about educational attainment; these scholarships are meant for the best talent that we can groom even further," he says.

The YSD Excellence Scholarship is awarded annually to high-achieving students to pursue their tertiary studies overseas and locally.

YSF chief executive officer Yatela Zainal Abidin adds that the foundation continuously engages its scholars through its Scholar Development Programme.

"This happens during their course of study - we bring them back for internships, keep them updated on the company and give them leadership skills.

"We even prepare them for interviews, because they will still have to undergo an interview process to secure employment with us.

"We also involve them in community projects, to bring them down to earth and instil human values," she says.

The foundation also provides two other scholarship schemes for local tertiary study; the YSD Skill Enrichment Programme for candidates to pursue technical certificate and diploma programmes, and the YSD Bursary Programme for students with special needs or low income families.

"With regards to the scholarships for disadvantaged students, the interviews are less stringent but they still need satisfactory academic grades," says Dr Dr Wan Mohd Zahid.

"The idea here is that they (students) are given the opportunity to expand their talents, and improve their socio-economic status through education."

Then there is the YSD "Star" Scholarship initiated in 2010, which aims to develop "world-class Malaysians" in the arts, music, sports, environment and sciences.

"This means it is meant for truly exceptional young people who have represented Malaysia on an international level, not just kampung champions," adds Dr Wan Mohd Zahid candidly.

This year's recipient of the YSD "Star" scholarship is national track cyclist Fatehah Mustapa, earning a RM40,000 award to pursue her tertiary education in Australia.

The 23-year-old will be pursuing a two-year foundation course followed by a four-year degree in business marketing at the University of Victoria in Melbourne.

Since its inception in 1982, the foundation has awarded scholarships worth RM142mil for over 1,434 outstanding, deserving and needy students locally and overseas.

Aside from its numerous scholarship opportunities, YSD also carries out education-related programmes with community development feel such as its Academic Development Programme for empowering rural schools.

Supported by the Perak State Education Department, the three-year project started in 2010 and involves two schools located at Felcra estates in Perak - SMK Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah and SMK Changkat Lada.

Dr Wan Mohd Zahid explains that the foundation wanted to do more than just give financial aid to the schools.

"There is an RM900,000 for the entire project, but we wanted to actively engage the institutions and participate in the school process — for real change to happen there needs to be a cultural and educational shift within the schools," he says.

The programme includes in-school activities as well as coaching by "mentor" teachers from high performing schools to share teaching knowledge and methodologies.

"One of the first activities we car-
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ried out was to bring the rural students out of their 'habitat', to a high performing school in Gombak," says Dr Wan Mohd Zahid.

"While students and teachers from the different schools got on quite well with each other, you could see that the rural students were more withdrawn.

"By the end of the 10-day trip, the quietest girl amongst the rural students could stand up on stage and speak her mind with confidence - that transformation was amazing to see."

He adds that another dimension to the project was to record proven success to help formulate new education intervention policies.

"Of course it was tough at first, but the teachers gradually opened up to our ideas and suggestions.

"If change can be done, we will forward our findings to the Education Ministry - maybe these rural schools are disadvantaged because they've not been engaged in a certain way," he says.

At the tertiary level, the foundation also channels funds to universities for research purposes.

"We don't want to pour money (into research) for the pleasure of doing research - it must have value to Sime Darby (Berhad) as a group," quips Dr Wan Mohd Zahid.

"So we sent out a brief to all the local research universities on developing a 'zero waste' project related to palm oil manufacturing.

"Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) came up with an attractive proposal, which involved the use of microbes that eat up palm oil mill effluent to create useful by-products such as fertiliser."

Palm oil mill effluent is a waste product generated from palm oil production.

The university's proposal subsequently resulted in the YSD-UKM Chair for Sustainable Development - Zero Waste Technology for the Palm Oil Industry, which was set up last year with an endowment of RM15mil.

Dr Wan Mohd Zahid adds that if the research is successful, it could be used as an industry standard to minimise the effects of pollution.

"It will take some time, but we have set some "quick win" deadlines - by June, the researchers are supposed to produce the fertiliser by-product.

"We are also funding research to reduce the black soot in our processing plants in Sabah," he says.

The foundation had also previ-