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UTAR to host Asia's top young physicists

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Counting down: Prof Ewe and Pua (second and third from left, respectively) looking on as APhO secretary Dr Lee Poh Foong (far right) showcases a poster of the event. Also present is APhO co-chair of publicity Dr Tan Chun Hui (far left). — SAMUEL ONG/The Star

High-schoolers from 26 countries to compete in 24th Olympiad showdown

IN light of the need to encourage more Malaysian students to pursue science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) is bringing the Asian Physics Olympiad (APhO) to Malaysia this year, marking the country's first time hosting the event.

Scheduled to take place from June 3 to 10 at the UTAR Kampar campus in Perak, the 24th edition of the Olympiad will see some 177 secondary school students from 26 countries across the Asian and Oceanic regions taking on each other in a physics showdown.

Each national delegation comprises up to eight student competitors and two adult leaders. As the host, Malaysia will feature two delegations.

Additionally, some 103 observers from the participating countries will be present at the event.

UTAR president and APhO adviser Prof Datuk Dr Ewe Hong Tat said hosting the event is the varsity's way of playing its role in motivating and inspiring more Malaysian students to excel in STEM-related subjects.

"It also encourages students to share a vision of developing science and technology in the country," he told StarEdu.

At the Olympiad, participants will compete in two five-hour sections: a theoretical examination comprising three questions and a laboratory experiment involving one or two experiments.

Participants have the opportunity to win gold, silver and bronze medals, as well as awards for best theory, best experiment and overall best performance.

APhO chairman Dr Pua Chang Hong, who is also associate professor at UTAR Lee Kong Chian Faculty of Engineering & Science, said the Olympiad not only offers an exchange of knowledge, but also provides participants with opportunities to learn different cultures, and network with experts and peers from other countries.

"Our students will also gain insights into the standards of science and physics in Malaysia, and gauge how they compare to students from top-performing countries," he said.

Prof Ewe shared that the varsity plans to invite more teachers and students to observe the competition.

"We want students to know that Malaysia not only has the capability to host an international event such as the APhO, but also that our students can compete with the very best from other countries.

"This is a good opportunity for students to gain exposure," he said, adding that students and teachers can also participate by attending the online broadcast of the plenary talks, which are part of the itinerary.

On what he hopes participants take away from the Olympiad, Pua said, "The purpose of the event is for students to enjoy themselves while fostering a love for physics and science, and recognising the importance of science and technology."

Emphasising the relevance of STEM, Pua added that physics – from lighting and transportation to artificial intelligence, big data and quantum computing – is the fundamental factor that determines whether a country can develop and advance ahead of others.

“If we look at the United States and China, two of the world’s biggest countries, they lead because of their advancements in technology,” he said.

He stressed that it is vital to raise students’ interest in STEM and expose them to challenging questions and problems.

“They need to know there are many challenges in science and technology waiting to be solved. This is one of the platforms that can prepare them for the future,” he said.

Prof Ewe added that secondary school is a crucial time for students to prepare for their future.

“If they learn well, they can advance to cutting-edge areas in science and technology, becoming future chief technologists, chief scientists and chief executive officers.

“We observe that students who perform well at events such as the APhO continue to excel not only in their tertiary studies, but also in making future breakthroughs in science and technology,” he said.

For more information about the 24th edition of the APhO, visit https://apho2024.utar.edu.my.