The Star

Yale, Harvard, here we come!

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Dynamic duo: Time management skills and mental strength keep Lee (left) and Thamini going as students.

SEEKING meaningful experiences beyond their academic pursuits has borne fruit for two Malaysian students.

Lee Wei Lun will be heading to Yale College while Thamini Vijeyasingam to Harvard College for their undergraduate studies this August.

Ever since their secondary school days, the duo have filled their student lives with a multitude of extracurricular activities.

As A-Level students, they served as presidents of their respective A-Level student councils – Lee at Sunway College Kuala Lumpur and Thamini at Methodist College Kuala Lumpur (MCKL).

Even after their examinations, they went on to take a gap year to immerse themselves in areas of their interest.

And they firmly believe that active participation in such activities was pivotal in their gaining admission to the Ivy League in the United States.

Lee said US university admissions place an emphasis on well-rounded applicants compared to those in other countries.

“It is imperative for students to step out of their comfort zones.

“Stepping out of your comfort zone means consciously overriding your introverted tendencies, taking a deep breath and connecting with others at that policy conference; it means conquering your self-doubt about leadership and stepping boldly into that director role in that club; it means embracing failure as a stepping stone to growth, and in the process, developing a thick skin against unconstructive external judgement,” the 20-year-old told StarEdu.

He also emphasised proactiveness in pursuing these activities regardless of schooling age.

“If you have big dreams for yourself, I cannot emphasise enough how it truly is better late than never to start gunning for them. I only started being active in secondary school in Year 10 at age 16. This rule will apply no matter which stage of education you are at,” he said.

During his gap year last year, Lee established KITS Malaysia, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering underprivileged youth to succeed in the future job market.

Concurrently, he embarked on a journey to deepen his understanding of computer science by assuming a junior tech analyst role at a burgeoning technology startup.

“Demonstrating to Yale my concrete plans for my gap year has shown further potential,” he said.

Thamini’s gap year served as a pivotal period of exploration, during which she immersed herself in internships, student organisations and contests.

During this time, she served as the chief executive director for the International Council of Malaysian Scholars, took part in journalistic endeavours at an online news portal, and competed at the International Economics Olympiad last year as part of Team Malaysia.

“A big reason why I took a gap year was to spend time exploring and identifying what it was I enjoyed doing and what I wanted to pursue,” the 19-year-old said.



Reflecting on the challenge of balancing academics and extracurriculars during their A-Level studies, the duo attributed their key coping strategies to time management skills and mental strength.
Lee said he benefited from turning to self-help literature and following thought leaders like Ali Abdaal and Mark Manson.

“These truly changed my perspective on how to approach my goals and my daily life. They taught me how to manage procrastination and burnout, and solidify essential habits, among other things, which has helped me pull through balancing academics and extracurriculars and excel in both of them,” he shared.

Thamini credited productivity tools such as Forest and Google Calendar for helping her implement the ritual of “time blocking” and ensuring she prioritised important tasks.

She also noted the importance of pacing oneself.

“I eased up on my club commitments during my final semester at MCKL, which coincided with my final A2 examinations.

“I was involved in the Economics, Model United Nations and Debate clubs, but as a committee member, so my hours per week dropped. It was good because I needed the extra time for studying,” she said.

Lee, who is set to major in computer science with economics, aspires to fuse his technical acumen with business savvy as a future product manager.

He looks forward to innovating in extended reality at Yale, which he said aligns with the varsity’s interdisciplinary ethos, providing him with fertile ground to cultivate his skills.

The allure of Yale for him began when he found out about the varsity and its system and culture at the 2016 World Scholar's Cup.

Thamini, who seeks to make a meaningful impact in a field that resonates with her values, plans to pursue economics with a minor in philosophy.

"Growing up, I definitely was cognisant of the Ivy League, thanks to its portrayal in the media, but only really started exploring it as an educational pathway before I began studying A-Levels," she said, adding that she is inspired by the breadth of academic disciplines and the enriching campus environment, particularly at Harvard.

In discussing the college application process, she emphasised the importance of starting early.

"Start as early as possible, and not just on the application itself.

"Taking a gap year gave me the extra time to think about what I wanted from my education and to solidify what I wanted to study, although I recognise that taking a gap year may not be an option for others.

"Nonetheless, I feel that you should give yourself at least one to two years before you plan to enrol to decide where you're going to focus your effort and energy into extracurricular activities," she advised.

Sydney, 20, a student in Kuala Lumpur, is a participant of the BRATs Young Journalist Programme run by The Star's Newspaper-in-Education (Star-NiE) team. For updates on the BRATs programme, go to facebook.com/niebrats.

With the theme of the article in mind, carry out the following English language activities.

1 How well-rounded are you as a student? Rate yourself from one to five, with five being the highest. In what way can you improve your balance of academic and extracurricular pursuits? Write down your goals in a journal entry.

2 How have you stepped out of your comfort zone this year? Exchange experiences with your friends and share how these experiences have contributed to your personal growth.

The Star’s Newspaper-in-Education (Star-NiE) programme promotes the use of English language in primary and secondary schools nationwide. For Star-NiE enquiries, email starnie@thestar.com.my.