Mooting their way to the top

Team from NUS law faculty emerges champion from a 23-strong field in Oxford

The fully fledged professionals and undergraduates alike, this image should bring back some memories: an examination period draws near, tables and benches all around campus get more and more crowded with students finishing off their revision. And you would find it hard to ignore the multitude of colours used to highlight notes.

The use of different hues is a simple but effective technique, just ask Nuraisah Ruslan, 24. It was one of the methods employed by the final year student from NUS Faculty of Law to cope with stress in the heat of a competition. Over the weekend of March 15-16, Nuraisah made expediency use of red and blue A4 paper to compartmentalise her prepared arguments for and against the issue at hand. This subsequently enabled her to switch seamlessly from one mindset to another in her line of argumentation.

In the end, sheer hard work and preparation combined with edge-of-your-seat spontaneity to culminate in success for her team, a two-girl partnership with co-ordinator Liz Zeming, 24, from the same cohort. They emerged at the top of the 23-team pile after defeating a team from University of British Columbia, in a hotly contested final rendered lively by fast-and-furious exchanges between the judging panel and competitors. The question for discussion revolved around the novel issue of whether the look, taste and smell of a blend of wine could be copyrighted.

The competition in question? The 6th International Intellectual Property Moot Competition, organised by Oxford Intellectual Property Research Centre and held in Worcester College, Oxford, England. The prize taken home by the girls? Their names immortalised in the competition challenge shield, individual trophies and an array of academic material — but more importantly, a unique experience not to be had anywhere else. “The biggest takeaway we got from the competition was exposure,” says Nuraisah.

Mooting - in general terms, a simulation of real life court cases - sees participants either making their submissions to a court of appeal as “appellants”, or arguing against the case as “respondents”. Being well-versed and thoroughly prepared helps, but can only take one so far. In the midst of 15-75 minutes of submission time, judges are free to interrupt and ask for clarification, so a speaker lacking composure may be knocked off stride.

A unique grill factor of the competition was the panel of judges. Among them were judges from the UK Court of Appeals, which is the second highest court in the UK after the House of Lords. Locals packed the competition hall just to see those judges in an informal setting, where they could be caught in candid and at-times “entertaining” banter with the competitors in the process of competition.

Also, “the approaches that turned out to work were far from what we expected, working on the premise that the way UK court judges look at issues is very different from what we’ve used to locally”.

Unrelenting practice

The girls both attribute their good performance to their Legal Analysis, Writing and Research course which was covered by associate professor Eleanor Wong over the first two semesters in their first year. Having taken place way back in AR 04-05, and referred to as “Mooting 101” by Zeming, says a lot about the foundational role the module played in honing the students’ public speaking skills. They got their opportunity to compete as members of the 24-against strong International Legal Process elective module.

To give some perspective, the module only constitutes four out of 20 required credits for a year four student’s last two semesters - meaning much blood, sweat and tears were spilled in the process of preparation.

They went through an unrelenting schedule of mooting practice beginning from the start of their second year. November, training “friendly every day” before a mock panel of dedicated IP practitioners happy to judge their practice sessions and act as a source of mooting experience to tap on.

Many weekends were burnt and personal sacrifices made. The large amount of time spent by Zeming in the faculty room led to incredulous comments from passers-by who wondered why “this weird girl is always in the room”. Nuraisah literally didn’t move from her sofa for as long as three days and even switched off the fan so as not to be disturbed by the noise.

There was to be no let-up in preparations. Ms Wong, also their coach, got “right down to business” and put them through a practice session the very afternoon of their arrival at the competition premises, in the common kitchen area.

At the competition itself, pressure and fatigue began to mount. There wasn’t much chance to interact with the other competing teams, and the girls had to skip something to fine tune their arguments.

And they stood out for it. Although the local UK teams were not adequately prepared - not having formal training as mooting is not institutionally trained like in NUS, but rather more along the lines of student body initiatives - ploughing through to the finals was some kind of proposition as the NUS team only came up against one UK team, meeting the “more prepared teams” from Australia, Hong Kong, Scotland and finally Canada on its way to victory, it is a sweet reward to go with their graduation from NUS, which will take place next month.

Law students typically spend a year or two post-graduation, before firms are confirmed together with the sector of law they will practice. So what place do they have after receiving their degrees? Zeming will have her stint at Baker & McKenzie Wong & Lew, which is the local presence of an international US law firm, Nuraisah will be heading to Drew and Napier.

The advice they have for students in general is applicable anywhere: that achievements can be had without compromising personal activities or confidence.

“Many seasoned mooting got where they are because they’ve tried and failed repeatedly,” said Zeming.

“And they play hard as well. Life’s not just about exams, but the experiences we should try as well”