

Student leaders step up to organise top events



NTU students Pansy Wang (left) and Leow Jiamin (right), both 22, co-chaired the student committee for the Biomedical Engineering Society's 5th Scientific Meeting last month. They were advised by NTU Assistant Professor Sierin Lim, 34. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

They organise biomed meet and are helping next month's World Leadership Conference

■ BY FENG ZENGKUN

YOUNG people here are stepping up and taking charge of organising nationwide events.

Last month, the Biomedical Engineering Society's (BES) 5th Scientific Meeting was organised entirely by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) students. Next month's World Leadership Conference for the environment is also being put together by student volunteers from schools nationwide.

The events are likely to be organised by student volunteers in the future. The Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) and Science Centre Singapore are also accepting applications for their weekly programme, called the Singapore Academy of Young Engineers and Scientists, which will eventually be directed by student leaders.

Students say taking charge of these events has many benefits. Miss Pansy Wang, 22, co-chair of the BES event's student committee, said she met many industry professionals and made valuable contacts in the course of planning the conference. "You put your name out there, and it's almost like a job interview even before you graduate," she said.

Miss Dianne Goh, 22, part of the World Leadership Conference team, said her fellow students' and her tender years have led many professionals to offer their network of friends and free advice.

"There's a lot of goodwill because we're putting time and effort into these events even though we don't have many resources or contacts," she said.

Mr James Hosking, 37, managing director of green website Eco-Business, has met the team three times since they started planning the conference.

"Their initial document for sponsors was seven pages long. I took away a lot of words, added charts and helped them cut it down to five pages," he said.

Students can also learn from the hard-won experience of those who have gone before them, said Mr Cai Li, 25, a student at the National University of Singapore and a member of the World Leadership Conference committee.

With plans to set up his own green business selling recycled plastic T-shirts, Mr Cai said he was struck by the words of the owner of an organic-clothing company, who is a guest speaker at the conference.

"He said it's not enough that the product is green. It also has to be value for money or people won't buy it," Mr Cai said.

Students The Straits Time spoke to said organising the conference has given them a clearer sense of the working world and its meetings and conferences. Another bonus was learning how to manage large sums of money. For the BES conference, the students were given a budget of \$12,000. The World Leadership Conference budget is \$100,000.

To allay the concerns of sponsors and advisers, the students had to draw up a detailed budget of where the money would go.

"We borrowed everything we could, right down to tables, chairs and poster boards," said Miss Leow Jiamin, 22, co-chair of the BES conference.

Paper fliers were adapted to digital copies that could be broadcast on campus televisions. A committee member also learnt programming languages to create and maintain the conference's website.

"The students were creative and made every dollar count," said Dr Sierin Lim, 34, an assistant professor of bioengineering at NTU and the students' adviser.

Experts The Straits Times spoke to said having student organisers benefited the events.

Dr Lim said students are better at getting their peers to participate in the conferences.

Two months after the NTU team approached student groups and teachers in schools here, more than 200 people signed up for the conference, double the number in the previous conference.

Miss Leow said this is partly because students are more comfortable confiding their worries to peers. She said the committee was initially puzzled by the lack of submissions from junior colleges for the oral presentation section of the conference.

It was only after they went to the schools that they found the students had little experience in public speaking, which "made them shy about giving oral presentations".

Miss Goh also noted that professionals were often more willing to help or participate because her team is not affiliated with any political or corporate body. "There's less baggage and distrust when it comes to student organisations," she said.

Scientists who attended the BES conference last month said the students did a good job.

Professor Jackie Ying, a guest speaker from A*Star, said the conference was indistinguishable from one organised by professionals.

NTU's Dr Lim said the organising committee of the BES conference is likely to be rotated among tertiary institutions here in the future, but students from other schools would be welcome to volunteer.

For the student committee of the World Leadership Conference, the event next month will be the culmination of their labours.

"I'm sleeping at 2am every day and checking my phone every other minute," said Miss Goh. "But I don't resent a single moment of it."

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