

‘It still feels like home’: Timor-Leste students

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Alicia and Priscilla.

KOTA KINABALU: For Timor-Leste students, Priscilla and Alicia, who are both studying Industrial Chemistry at the Faculty of Science and Technology, UMS’ natural surroundings made a strong impression.

Priscilla said her first impression of the campus was its green environment. She described the natural flora reflected UMS’ EcoCampus identity.

She said that one of her challenges was adjusting to Sabahan-Malay slang, which differed from the language she was used to in Timor Leste.

She also said the friendliness of UMS students and the large community she is surrounded with helped her adapt quickly to the enviroment.

“In Sabah, or in UMS, the people are very kind. That’s why I think I kind of adapted fast to the environment and the people here,” she said.

Coming to UMS was also a significant personal milestone for Priscilla because it was her first trip abroad without her parents.

“Of course, I miss my family. I never went far away from my parents. This is my first time going by myself to another county,” she said.

She added that the similarities between Sabah and Timor-Leste, particularly their tropical environment and coastal setting aided the transition process.

Meanwhile, Alicia expressed her admiration for the size and organization of the UMS campus, which has 12 faculties.

“When I arrived here, my first impression was I was really excited, and I couldn’t believe this is the biggest campus I had seen,” she said.

Alicia said that she discovered the Sabahan slang is different from the Malay language commonly heard in Kuala Lumpur.

She said she was used to hearing sentences that end with “lah” whereas Sabahans typically use “bah”.

“It’s kind of different with how the Malay language is used, but it’s cute to know the difference,” she said.

Alicia said that adjusting to university life presented challenges, such as the number of assignments assigned for various subjects and water supply issues.

However, she said that Sabah’s natural environment helped ease homesickness, particularly due to its similarities to Timor-Leste.

“When I first came to Sabah, I didn’t feel really homesick because Sabah and Timor- Leste nature was still untouched. So when I see it, I still feel like home,” she said.

The similarities extend to the sea, with both students mentioning their familiarity with living near the ocean.

Alicia’s experience at UMS also included introducing her friends to the flavors of Sabah after she brought home a durian snack.

“They tasted it and they really liked it. It was the first time that we as Timorease were eating durian originally from Sabah,” she said.

The three students are among the international students starting their academic careers at UMS during the 2026/27 Welcome and Orientation Week, bringing a variety of backgrounds and goals while experiencing Sabah’s environment and culture for the first time.

For Clara, the journey is ultimately about fulfilling a childhood dream in a location that provides both the academic program and the natural environment she seeks.

Meanwhile, Priscilla and Alicia have spent their first weeks at UMS adjusting to a new academic environment, language, and culture while also discovering familiar aspects of home in Sabah.