Warring Farmers raking in fans

NUS students get cracking on Facebook projects

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IT IS not often that the class assignment is to develop applications for the hottest social networking platform in the world, Facebook.

For Ms Cheah Huay Lian, 20, who is usually pre-occupied with her degree in chemical engineering, it has been an opportunity that is already seeing some success.

She is one of the developers behind FarmWars II, a Facebook game about warring farmers that is raking in some fans – 6,000 at the last count.

It may be a long way from beating Scrabulous – another Facebook game that had 840,000 users at its peak – but it is a nice way for her to accumulate course credits. The module "Software Development on Evolving Platforms" offered at the National University of Singapore (NUS) is believed to be the second class in the world focussed on developing Facebook applications.

PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

The class, which began in January and ended Friday, follows in the footsteps of the first such course at San Francisco's Stanford University.

NUS lecturer, Assistant Professor Ben Leong (picture), told TODAY that the main aim was to equip his 51 students with the ability to keep up with the changing software development landscape.

Said Asst Prof Leong: "Our goal here is to have students pick up new technologies quickly as well as pick up some industry contacts and experience.

"We decided to focus on Facebook applications this semester because its application framework is the most developed."

The course, a cross-faculty module open to students beyond NUS' School of Computing, has students working in small teams to study and critique existing Facebook applications as well as to deploy new ones.

"I've always wanted to create a game. That has always been one of my ambitions," said Ms Cheah.

"I am more well-versed in website design but through the software course, I've learnt other aspects of game production, and more importantly, basic programming."

There is talk that companies could be invited to class next semester to talk about what kind of Facebook applications they would like to see, and collaborate with students on projects.

But the course may not remain focussed only on programming for social networking platforms, said Asst Prof Leong.

"When software development for these platforms become commonplace, we will likely move on to explore newer and more novel programming platforms," he said.

And while Facebook is the wildly popular platform now, with more than 69 million active users worldwide, in future semesters, students will also likely be introduced to newer software engineering platforms like Google OpenSocial and Adobe Air.

Just the opportunity to dabble in something different is attractive enough for students like geography major Luo Yanjie, 23.

"There was some criticism that NUS was copying what Stanford had done but what attracted me to the course is that it was not about Facebook per se, but more about facing new trends," he said.

"I was taught new skills and learnt how to manage people and to develop applications, which are things you can't learn from the textbook and which were very useful to me."

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TODAY FILE PHOTO

WAY TO GO: Like Banquet foodcourt, many eateries are going *halal* to capture the Muslim crowd.

Halal-certified businesses on a roll

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OVER the past eight years, the number of *halal*-certified businesses in Singapore has grown nearly four-fold from 530 to over 2,000, and an increasing number of eateries are catering to more adventurous palates.

Observers said there is still plenty of room for the industry to grow as the spending power of the Muslim community is going up. That is why more businesses are keen to tap the global halal food market that is estimated to be worth over $760 billion.

One such player is Sakura International, which serves up a wide range of cuisines that are all *halal*-certified. It said the variety gives them the edge in a very competitive industry.

Mr Roger Soh, operations manager of Suki Group of Restaurants, said: "Mirin, which is a kind of sweet wine, is often used in preparing Japanese food. It is very difficult to get a replacement to meet the *halal* requirements, so we need to bring in more of these ingredients."

The company, which is opening a fifth restaurant soon, said sales have gone up by 70 per cent since it turned *halal* in 2005.

Another business that has seen the benefits of *halal*-certification is Qi Ji, which is known for its hawker-style fare. Even though Qi Ji still has its eye firmly on the Singapore market for the time being, it said that being certified will definitely open doors if it moves overseas.

Mr Alan Lau, operations director of Qi Ji, said: "In fact, we have offers from overseas business partners for joint ventures in Dubai, Indonesia and Brunei."

Ms Dewi Hartaty Suratty, head of Halal Certification Strategic Unit from Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Muis), said: "Many manufacturers want to export their products to Muslim countries like the Middle East, Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries would require them to have a *halal* certificate."

Muis said for the past few years, it has seen a 10 per cent growth every year in the number of applicants for *halal*-certification and it expects this growth to continue going forward. — CHANNEL NEWSASIA