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16-year-old prodigy aims for the skies and the Nobel Prize

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Sixteen-year-old Zenaida Sofia Salih Lowe is rising up to meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's challenge for a Malaysian Nobel Laureate by 2020.

Inspired by the challenge, the top performer applied to Dartmouth College, an Ivy League institution in the United States, and was accepted for the Bachelors degree in Astrophysics.

Accepted under its early admission policy, she is scheduled to begin her studies this September but has yet to receive word from sponsors willing to finance her studies.

An all-rounder and endowed with analytical and interpretive abilities that bely her age, Zenaida's hope to achieve honour for the nation hangs in the balance.

Her young age and lack of an SPM qualification has been a handicap, not only in getting a scholarship but even to be taken seriously by the relevant local authorities. She obtained 7As in the PMR at Sekolah Menengah St George's, Penang.

Despite such scepticism, Zenaida's brilliance was acknowledged by four Tier One colleges in the US where she was offered admission under their policy for early admission.

Zenaida, recipient of the 1996 Tunas Jaya award and a computer whizz, chose Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, as it was known to be the most computer-connected campus.

She said the college runs special research programmes under its "Women and Science" and "Presidential Scholars Project" that allows students to conduct research.

"Space exploration has fascinated me since young and I admire physicist Stephen Hawkings very much. This is an opportunity to work with some of the best minds in astrophysics in the US."

Her mother, former director of Universiti Sains Malaysia Archeology Research Centre, Professor Datuk Zuraina Majid said Zenaida was not allowed to sit for the SPM because of her age. "This has hampered efforts to get a scholarship for her. Many people do not realise that this is a rare opportunity for a young Malaysian. It is Dr Mahathir's aspirations that has spurred her on."

Datuk Dr Vincent Salih Lowe, former USM dean of postgraduate studies, said her aptitude in scientific reasoning has moulded Zenaida into a dedicated researcher.

"With proper training and supervision, she should be capable of path-breaking research. The complexity of her interests display an innovative mind that can find fulfilment in science.

"As parents we have done all that we can. The authorities should take this as an extraordinary case and make exception to the SPM and STPM ruling in awarding scholarships.

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