

Orientation – just fun or plain lewd?

Students, academics, freshmen and others weigh in on the sexual slant

Shuli Sudderuddin

When National University of Singapore (NUS) freshman Rachel Lee turned up at an orientation camp in campus last month, she got a rude shock.

During one of the games, she was made to do a forfeit where the “girls had to lie down and the guys had to do push-ups over them”, she said.

Ms Lee, 19, declined to comply – she felt the act was lewd.

Another game she observed required participants to pass M&M chocolates to one another using their mouths.

“I left after the first day with five or six like-minded friends,” she said of the five-day camp organised by the NUS Students’ Union.

“Lewd and improper” orientation activities were the subject of a letter by reader Soh Eng Phang, who wrote to the Straits Times Forum page recently complaining about this.

In a phone interview elaborating on this, Ms Soh, who is in her 40s, said: “They are totally uncalled for and give youth a very superficial idea about making friends and finding a partner.”

Orientation is held at the start of a school year in July and August to welcome freshmen. This year, the three universities here welcomed 14,700 freshmen.

Most camps are run by students and attendance at most activities is optional.

In the past, the trend was to subject freshmen to humiliating treatment such as having one’s head dunked in a toilet bowl or having to do chores at their seniors’ bidding.

Over the years, however, orientation has taken on a more sexual slant.

Unlike Ms Lee, however, many

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In a letter to The Straits Times, reader Soh Eng Phang, who is in her 40s, felt the Social Development Unit (SDU) and school authorities should monitor orientation camps, since many are partly sponsored by SDU. She described cases of male students doing push-ups over female students lying on the floor.

Ms Wong Kuan Ying, deputy director of the SDU, said it supports events run by students that promote interaction.

“SDU does not approve of the games Ms Soh described,” she added.

SDU informs students who seek its support that physical contact in activities must be kept minimal.

other freshmen accept such games as a time-honoured ritual and do not find them objectionable.

Ms Yvonne Ho, 19, a freshman at the NUS faculty of arts and social sciences, attended a camp run by Sheares Hall hostel earlier this month. Forfeits included touching the chests of males.

“I don’t see a reason to get agitated. This is in fun and we laugh about it. There’s nothing sexual,” she said.

Students from NUS and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) said their orientation camps often included risque games and forfeits. At the Singapore Management University (SMU), students said games and forfeits were milder.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, director of youth services at the Singapore Children’s Society, said the young today are more confident.

“They are bolder and some set up situations to break social barriers, especially since those between ages 18 and 21 are beginning to seek partners,” she noted.

Said Mr Sam Kuna, family therapist and executive director of volunteer welfare organisation Teen Challenge: “Normal games and old-fashioned ragging just don’t cut it anymore.”

But sexually-charged activities can backfire if they are too extreme, he said. “At least 70 per cent of students are conservative and these games could make some more inhibited.”

Universities said they put a firm

foot down on any demeaning activities.

Associate Professor Low Aik Meng, dean of students at SMU, said: “SMU does not feel that ragging will help our students achieve the objectives of building collegiality, team spirit and a sense of belonging.”

A spokesman for NTU said the university will take action against students who overstep the boundaries of decency.

Over at NUS, a spokesman said that if the university receives complaints, it will investigate and counsel or discipline students.

However, some students and organisers feel that activities involving physical contact are no big deal.

NTU Cultural Activities Club camp programmer Choi Wen Ting, 22, said: “These games are only small elements and can boost the spirit of the camp. University students are sensible enough to speak up if they are uncomfortable.”

This sentiment is shared by Ms Nadya Huang, 20, who sits on the executive committee of the NUS Students’ Arts and Social Sciences Club.

“It’s just for fun and we’re all adults. I’ve never seen people do anything against their will.”

shulis@sph.com.sg

Are university orientation games getting too physical? Send your views to suntimes@sph.com.sg