

Publication: Today Online

Date: 25 March 2018

Headline: Compulsory overseas exposure at SMU will level playing field, say needy students

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SINGAPORE — Coming from a single-parent family which has to be especially prudent in its spending, 18-year-old Liu Hongyu had gone only for short school trips to Bintan and Kota Tinggi (Malaysia) in her secondary school years.

Though the JC2 arts student at Pioneer Junior College (PJC) student would have jumped at the chance to attend more, she told TODAY that the cost of these overseas trips were always a big drawback.

Hence when Singapore Management University (SMU) announced last Thursday (March 22) that it was making overseas exposure a mandatory graduation requirement for all its undergraduates from August, and that it was enhancing support for financially-strapped students, prospective undergraduates said this move to help low-income students will “level the playing ground and raise the standards” across the board.

Pointing out that she “learns best by experiencing things”, Hongyu — who is thinking of applying to SMU to study marketing or corporate communications — said such an initiative would allow all students to benefit through a shared overseas learning experience.

ENSURING POORER STUDENTS DON'T MISS OUT

SMU said it is committed to providing the necessary assistance and financial support to make sure that students with financial difficulties do not miss out on such compulsory overseas experiences, which can range from exchange programmes to internships.

International exchange programmes typically span around 15 weeks, or one term or semester of study, while overseas internships will take about 10 weeks, said SMU's vice provost (Undergraduate Matters) Lim Kian Guan.

Responding to TODAY's queries on costs, Professor Lim estimates that an exchange for one term at a South-east Asian partner university can cost from S\$5,000, or S\$8,000 for other Asian universities. For the Oceania, European and American universities, the cost can range between S\$12,000 and S\$16,000 for a four- to six-month period. These are additional costs on top of SMU's tuition and student fees.

However, he added that there are also shorter trips, such as three-week-long overseas community service projects, 11-day-long trips for co-curricular activities, or overseas study missions which can span 10 to 14 days.

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Costs for study missions, for instance, can vary from between S\$500 and S\$1,000 to South-east Asian countries, up to S\$2,000 for Asian countries, or about S\$3,000 to S\$4,000 for trips to Europe or North America.

Prof Lim added that the scope of financial assistance for needy students can range from S\$500 to S\$10,000.

In exceptional circumstances — where students might have difficulties travelling due to medical conditions or are sole caregivers of ailing family members and cannot go overseas for extended periods — Prof Lim said SMU would work with the students to “explore holistic alternatives”.

Hearing about the assistance that SMU would be offering reassured students like Brenda.

The 19-year-old, who has no last name, comes from a low-income household. She told TODAY she was initially worried about how she was going to fork out the money for the overseas experience.

The PJC graduate — who hopes to get into SMU’s courses in business and economics — said this move would ensure all SMU students get a “fair and equal chance” in overseas attachments. She is looking forward to raising her global awareness about the economy on such overseas trips.

FORCING STUDENTS OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE

Like Hongyu and Brenda, most students TODAY spoke to were eager at the idea of venturing overseas.

For graduating Singapore Polytechnic student Tay Qing, who did a course in electrical and electronic engineering, SMU’s requirement would “force” students out of their comfort zone, “instead of being stuck in Singapore just studying”.

While he had his eye on an overseas internship in Japan or China in his third year, he admitted ruefully that he “did not make the cut”. So, he is looking forward to doing so in university, to gain exposure on the job culture overseas, and gain greater exposure on how they function differently.

But there were others who felt there was no real need to make overseas exposure mandatory.

As Ngee Ann Polytechnic student Joey, 19 put it, many overseas companies are already based in Singapore and offer internship opportunities, so there is no need to go aboard to gain a competitive edge.

OVERSEAS EXPOSURE ALSO POPULAR IN OTHER UNIVERSITIES

While overseas exposure is an important, and popular, aspect of their undergraduate programmes, universities TODAY spoke to declined to comment if they would follow SMU’s lead.

While Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) currently has more than 75 per cent of its undergraduates going for at least one overseas experience, its associate provost of research and international relations Yeo Kiat Seng said the goal they are aiming for is 100 per cent.

Without further elaboration, an SUTD spokesperson said it plans to increase the number of partnerships with universities and industries partners to achieve its target.

Over at the National University of Singapore (NUS), its spokesperson said a “majority” of its students have chosen and benefitted from overseas stints.

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To date, about 2,000 students have interned for up to a year with start-ups, and studied at partner universities at entrepreneurial hubs around the world such as Silicon Valley, New York, Beijing, Shanghai, Stockholm and Tel Aviv under the NUS Overseas Colleges (NOC) programme. And more than 250 start-up companies have been founded by students and alumni from the NOC programme.

Eight out of 10 Nanyang Technological University (NTU) undergraduates had at least one overseas exposure during their studies, said its deputy provost (Education) Kam Chan Hin.

He added NTU students also benefit learning from an international faculty spanning more than 100 nationalities, as well as through interactions with international students who come to NTU for exchange.

As for the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), all students pursuing programmes awarded by its overseas university partners already undergo an overseas immersion programme.

While it is "still considering the options" for its SIT-conferred degree programmes, its spokesperson said students can gain overseas exposure through various other overseas exposure, work study, workshop and international internship programmes.