

Uni students gun for overseas stints

Some spend up to tens of thousands for experience, to buff up resumes

By SERENE LUO

OPTIONAL overseas exchange programmes have become a way for undergraduates to gild their resumes.

They see them as investments, and pay up to tens of thousands for the experience. Universities say the yen for global exposure has sharply increased in the last decade.

Among their 2011/2012 graduating cohorts alone, the National University of Singapore (NUS), Singapore Management University (SMU) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) say that at least half have been on at least one trip.

Eventually, they aim to have all undergraduates attend at least one exchange.

Such programmes are offered across all disciplines, and can last two weeks to more than six months. To qualify, students usually have to meet grade requirements, and some have to go through an interview.

SMU's director at the Office of Global Learning, Ms Bernadette Toh, said employers regard graduates with overseas stints as "less parochial, more broad-minded, resourceful and sensitive to intercultural issues", driving demand for these stints.

The most desired placements - in North America, Sweden and western Europe, especially Britain - are also the most expensive compared to those in Asian universities, which cost at least 20 per cent less.

To pay for these trips, students apply for loans, bursaries or grants. At SMU, up to 10 per cent receive scholarships or



SMU graduate Tricia Tan (right) with Norwegian roommate Astri Uten D at the peak of Medeu in Kazakhstan, one of many hiking trips the two made during Ms Tan's exchange programme there. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TRICIA TAN

awards worth between \$4,000 and \$9,000. Another 15 to 20 per cent get loans up to \$11,500, or subsidies of \$500 per trip. Universities generally facilitate loans from local banks.

Mr Keefe Tan, 26, took a bank loan of \$11,500 to fund multiple stays - two semester-long stints in Mexico and Poland, an internship in India and a community service trip to Thailand.

The recent graduate of SMU's School of Information Systems reasoned: "You can borrow money but you can't borrow time."

Tuition costs the same as for local courses. But students rack up bills for meals, living expenses, rent and additional travel.

Mr Leow Tien Leng, 22, an NTU mathematics undergradu-

ate, spent \$20,000 during his exchange last year to Stockholm University in Sweden.

He used up his scholarship stipend and wiped out his savings - spending half his funds on vacations.

Fortunate ones like Mr Evan Lee, 24, have help from parents. The third-year NUS arts and social sciences major spent up to \$25,000 over six months attending Ottawa University in Canada last year, when he also toured at least six cities in North America.

For substantially less money, some choose universities in Russia, Brazil and Kazakhstan, which can cost less than half of those in Germany or the United States.

Said SMU business graduate Tricia Tan, 24, who spent her \$8,000 grant on a stint in Kazakhstan and an internship in India: "The two places were very affordable."

Others stick to shorter, summer exchanges or stints at Asian universities.

Professor Tan Kang Hai, director of NTU's Office of Global Education and Mobility, pointed out: "A South Korean university can offer a similar course to that of University of California, Berkeley, at one-third the price."

"Plus, South Korea offers add-ons like cultural immersion, so why not?"

Human resource professionals, however, say it is not the destination, but what a student has gained that gives him an edge.

Singapore Human Resource Institute president Erman Tan said that while exchange programmes could teach undergraduates to be more adaptable and resourceful, "you must be able to relate that experience to work, and how you can help the company to grow".

He added: "If you can show how it has helped you, then it will score some points."

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