

Many friends from different cultures

One school's recipe for celebrating cultural diversity and friendship across nationalities

BY MERVIN TAY

AN INCLUSIVE learning environment and the simple act of friendship effectively fosters integration between Singaporeans and international students at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

With about 12 per cent of its 7,500 students coming from 23 countries, SMU is a diverse mix of cultures and nationalities.

Apart from SMU, other tertiary institutions also run similar integration programmes. These include the NUS Diversity Symposium which promotes awareness and understanding of the diverse cultures and backgrounds on campus, and Nanyang Technological University, which runs volunteerism programmes to help international students connect with the wider Singaporean community.

According to Professor Ong Siow Heng, Dean of Students, integration is important as the school hopes students will be able to embrace cultural diversity, given the increasingly globalised environment they are expected to operate and thrive in.

As such, SMU ensures both Singaporean and international students have ample opportunity to interact with each other.

For example, classes in SMU are capped at a size of 45, with five spots reserved for exchange students. The remaining 40 is a mix of full-time local and international students.

"We found that if left to their own, both local and international students tend to flock together with friends of their own nationalities," says Prof Ong.

"This way, our students experience diversity and gain global exposure."

Friends first

The International Students' Unit in the Office of Student Life helps international students settle in, and publishes the Singapore Shiook

handbook, which has information about Singaporean life, culture and language.

The handbook was mentioned by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as a light-hearted way to help new arrivals settle in.

"The unit also has other initiatives such as the Host Family Programme and a buddy programme where local students pair up with international students," says Prof Ong.

The SMU Host Family Programme has families inviting international students to their homes for meals, family gatherings and festive celebrations, helping students to widen their network of contacts in Singapore.

"This takes on a life of its own after the students become good friends with their hosts and buddies," says Prof Ong.

Students from SMU International Connections (ICON) agree that friendship is essential to integration.

As the international students' department of the Students' Association, ICON promotes diversity and integration through 12 clubs, like the Filipino and Japanese clubs.

Mr Lim Yan Pin, the current president of ICON, says: "The cultural clubs are based on countries and regions, but all students are welcome to join any club they like."

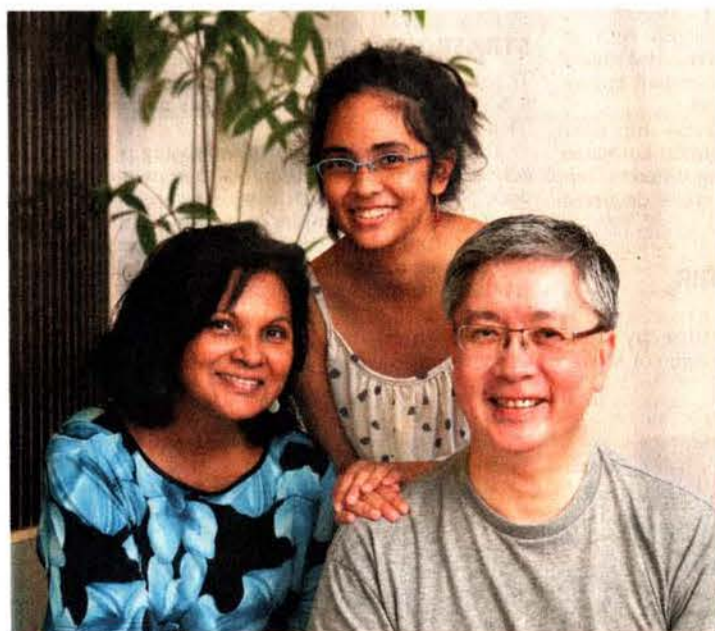
According to Mr Lim, Singaporean students are also active in a number of these clubs.

In August, ICON organised its first-ever orientation camp which had an emphasis on integration, and was well received by participants.

"We believe the formula for integration is simply friendship, so we wanted students to have fun regardless of their nationality or culture," says Ms Ada Chua, one of the



Both international and Singaporean students gather at one of the dinners hosted by Prof Ong. These include Mr Paul Harris (front row, left); Ms Alice Nguyen (second row, second from left); and president of ICON Lim Yan Pin (back row, first from right). PHOTOS: LONG KWOK HONG



I was once an international student, so I know what it's like to leave home and the difficulties one may face. I feel it's also important for my family and colleagues to meet students from different cultures.

— PROFESSOR ONG SIOW HENG
 (ABOVE, WITH WIFE AND DAUGHTER)

chairs of the camp's organising committee.

To ensure a good mix, each orientation group had both local and international students as facilitators.

"This way, besides their peers, each student will get to know at least one local and one international senior," says Ms Chua.

"And we consider the friendships forged as one of the benchmarks for the camp's success."

The students feel that getting to know and understand one another is important in getting integrated.

Ms Alice Nguyen, a Vietnamese student who co-chaired the camp with Ms Chua, says getting to know Singaporean friends helped her to settle down well here.

"I come from a non-English speaking country, so the language barrier was a problem initially," says Ms Nguyen.

"Besides helping me with English, my friends also introduced me to Singlish!" she adds.

For Mr Paul Harris, who has an American father and Thai mother, both of whom are based in Chiang Mai, he felt it was meaningful participating in integration activities, where boundaries of nationality and ethnicity were broken down.

"I'm in the Filipino club, and recently we organised a fundraiser for victims of Typhoon Haiyan, which had students of various nationalities helping out," he says.

"In a way, caring for one another through acts of humanity like this also indicates an effort to integrate."

Heart to heart

Listening to the experiences of their friends

from different countries has made an impact on Ms Chua.

"They've made a bold move by leaving their homes to live and study in Singapore, and bring with them different experiences and exposure," she says.

"Besides learning from them, I feel we should also make them feel at home in Singapore, by putting in effort to interact and integrate."

Prof Ong says it is difficult to measure the success of integration, but SMU collects data through questionnaires that are given out after events, and the results are encouraging.

"Ultimately, it is hard to get into the mindsets of people, but from how the students have grown and developed through their time here, we can make an educated guess," he says.

Prof Ong also gets feedback through an unconventional way: dinner.

For the past few years, he has hosted international students for dinner at his house every other month.

"I was once an international student, so I know what it's like to leave home, and the difficulties one may face," he says.

Ms Nguyen, who attended Prof Ong's dinner last month, said she was touched by his genuine interest in finding out student sentiment and the problems they may be facing.

Says Prof Ong: "I feel it's also important for my family and colleagues to meet students from different cultures."

If you are interested in hosting SMU's international students, contact Ms Kelly Yeo at kellyyeo@smu.edu.sg.