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More US students seek Asian experience



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 IN WASHINGTON

SO WHAT if economists say the continents are decoupling, young Americans figure the future is pretty much entwined.

More American students than ever are heading to universities in Asia, including in Singapore, to get up close and personal with the big growth story.

Among other things, they hope the experience will give them an edge at the workplace.

"As the world becomes more globalised, I will probably be interacting more and more with Asians at work," said Ms Shayna Brownstein, 21, an industrial-engineering student at the Georgia Institute of Technology and one of 30 students from the college who did a short-term study programme at the National University of Singapore.

After 5½ weeks in Singapore, she was headed to Beijing for a similar programme at Qinghua University before returning home to Atlanta.

There are many others.

From the University at Buffalo, the State University of New York, 40 undergraduate students have just spent six weeks at the Singapore Institute at Management. Last year, Buffalo sent 28 students.

Some of the students are spending an entire semester or a year in the graduate courses.

Unlike Europe, Asia has never been a favourite destination for American students. Now China stands at No. 10, just ahead of Japan, says a 2007 report by the New York-based Institute of International Education.

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PHOTO: COURTESY OF SHAYNA BROWNSTEIN

INTERACTING IN A GLOBALISED WORLD: Ms Shayna Brownstein, 21, a student at the Georgia Institute of Technology, was one of 30 students who did a short-term study programme at NUS.

And, of more than 223,000 American students who studied abroad in the 2005-06 academic year, 58 per cent chose Europe and only 9 per cent went to Asia.

But while the overall figure for those headed overseas was up by 8 per cent, the proportion who went to Asia jumped 26 per cent.

In the worldwide market for overseas education, estimated to be worth at least US\$2.2 trillion (S\$3 trillion), Singapore is seeking a niche with a distinctive and catchy message.

"Singapore's universities are marketing themselves to American students as fun places from which to understand Asia," said Mr John Conceicao, Director of the Education Services Division at the Singapore Tourism Board.

The three universities – NUS, NTU and the Singapore Management University – have more than 80 partnerships with US schools for undergraduate student exchange.

The drive is part of Singapore's Global Schoolhouse project to attract 150,000 international students by 2015.

Already, there are students from about 120 countries in Singapore, although nine out of 10 come from China, Indonesia,



PHOTO: COURTESY OF JUSTIN JIMENEZ

ASIAN CONNECTION: UCLA graduate Jimenez and NUS exchange adviser Daisy Ling. Mr Jimenez spent five months at NUS last year.

Malaysia, India, Vietnam and South Korea.

"Americans don't usually opt for full-fledged tertiary courses. So stints in Singapore are marketed as weeks-long study-abroad opportunities or as exchange programmes lasting a semester or two," said Mr Conceicao.

"What we say to them is that Singapore is a good springboard for having an Asian experience. Cliched as it is, this is where East meets West."

The message seems to be hitting home.

Mr Michael Swift of AsiaLearn, set up last year to promote overseas study opportunities, said: "I do see increasing interest in Asia among American students. They are paying attention to news on Asia and how this will likely impact on their future."

He described Singapore as the perfect starting point for students in Asia for the first time.

"The city is easy to navigate,

English is one of the official languages and the universities are excellent," he said.

Asia is still perceived as a venue for those majoring in language or Asian Studies, he said. "However, I believe there is a larger audience of students curious about these lands, but lacking confidence to embark on a study-abroad programme to Asia."

Professor Stephen Dunnett, Vice-Provost for International Education at the University at Buffalo, said Singapore is a safe introduction to cross-cultural encounters and what appeals to students is the very urban, modern, and Westernised environment.

"They can find their favourite junk foods," he said. "They meet students who wear the same kind of clothes, use the same iPods, even use the same Americanisms. It is not a culture shock that you might get, say, in China or Japan."

"But, as the students soon discover, Singapore is very Asian below the surface, while being very comfortable."

Another attraction: it is easy to travel from Singapore to other South-east Asian cities.

Mr David Schwartz, 21, a Georgia Tech student, said he was glad he had used his time to travel in the region.

"It allowed me to see how a large portion of the world lives, which is a lifestyle that I have never been able to see before. It really was a humbling experience," he said.

The students also said Singapore campuses stacked up well.

Said Ms Brownstein: "NUS is much more similar to Georgia Tech than I had imagined. The professors teach in a very similar style. The facilities are as good. The food courts and the landscaping, though, are far better."

"I truly enjoyed lunchtime conversations I had about Singaporean culture, food, ethics, education system, and many other topics. These insights will stay with me."

For Filipino-American Justin Jimenez, 22, a graduate from the University of California, Los Angeles, spending five months at NUS last year helped him understand his heritage.

"As an Asian-American, connecting to my roots in Asia is very important to me. It helped me to understand my place in the world – something not many Americans understand, or even feel is necessary to understand," he said.

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