Electronic gadgets and robots had always intrigued Mr Nguyen Thai Dung as a child. Now in his teens, the 19-year-old Vietnamese wants to become an outstanding electrical engineer in his country one day.

He took a big step towards reaching that goal when he received a scholarship to study electrical engineering at the National University of Singapore.

"I am definitely happy to receive the scholarship from the Singapore government. Singapore is the region's technology hub. And the education system in Singapore is very strong. I am certain there is a lot that I can learn."

It was a proud moment for him and 38 other scholars who received their scholarship awards from Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed, Singapore's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Like Nguyen, all these scholars were eager to begin their studies in Singapore.

The Singapore Scholarship Programme is an undergraduate scheme initiated by the Singapore government during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis to ensure that good educational opportunities remained available to young people in ASEAN. Since 1998, it has awarded a total of 349 scholarships. The Singapore government has invested more than $52.2 million in the programme.

Singapore's commitment to the Scholarship Programme reflects, in many ways, the city-state's dedication to providing "first-class education" to all.

Over 95 per cent of Singaporeans is literate – one of the highest rates in the region. One in four of every cohort enrolled in a university last year.

**THE REGION'S EDUCATION HUB**

The population's voracious appetite for education supports the government's drive to be an education hub in the region. Singapore's strategy to win international students is relatively clear-cut: to attract brand-name institutions to its shores even as it boosts the capabilities of its three local universities.

With three local universities – National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU) – and a wide array of brand-name institutions such as INSEAD, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), University of Chicago Graduate School of Business and John Hopkins University, Singapore has become a base for international undergraduate and postgraduate activities.

Its oldest university, NUS, celebrated its centennial this year and was recently ranked 18th among 200 top universities in the world by The Times of London newspapers. NTU’s business school, the Nanyang Business School, was ranked fourth in Asia by the Economist Intelligence Unit. SMU was established in 2000 as the third university, with an aim to groom talent mainly for the corporate sector.

The Government supports the local universities to excel. Former Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan underlined the role universities play in transforming Singapore’s economy and drawing talented people. "Top talent is drawn to institutions offering excellent research opportunities which, in turn, raise the quality of teaching, thereby producing excellent students, which further stimulates research."

The education scene in Singapore is poised for another boost when the Singapore Institute of Management University (UniSIM) – Singapore’s first private university approved by its Ministry of Education – and the University of New South Wales throw open their doors in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

**MANY ROUTES TO SUCCESS**

Students in Singapore can explore various paths to career success. In 2004, 42.3 per cent – or two in five students – were enrolled in a polytechnic in Singapore.

The five polytechnics – Nanyang, Ngee Ann, Temasek, Singapore and Republic – were established with the objective of grooming middle-level professionals with practical knowledge and training in specific sectors. They have created their own industry niches and identities to draw students.
Student performers raised a cheer after completing the symbolic march between the old SMU campus to the new City campus. The symbolic move formalised SMU’s relocation to its 45 hectares, state-of-the-art campus, giving the unique status of being Singapore’s only university in the Civic District.
Moves are underway to help these polytechnics link up with renowned foreign institutions to offer specialised degree courses for polytechnic graduates, especially in disciplines not available in the local universities at the moment. These new pathways are for students with different talents to obtain higher education and to realise their potential.

Vocational institutions are another means for students to attain post-secondary qualifications. They provide basic, pre-employment training to secondary school-leavers.

Vocational institutions such as the Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs) offer a broad-based, multi-disciplinary curriculum in fields ranging from engineering to nursing and multimedia.

Mr Sam Ho, a former ITE student, is an example of a student who took an alternative route. The winner of the Rotary-ITE Alumni Professional Achievement Award was once a student of ITE’s Air-conditioning & Refrigeration course. He went on to secure a degree in information technology in the UK and then a Master of Science degree in technology management. Today, he is Vice-President, Worldwide Programme Management, for ANDA Networks, a start-up company in Silicon Valley in the US.

THE BACKBONE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Forming the backbone of the Singapore education system is a network of primary and secondary schools and junior colleges. In recent years, they too have been moving towards a more flexible and diverse education system aimed at providing students with greater choice and ownership in their learning.

The Singapore curriculum is also popular outside Singapore. At least 20 schools in the region, including in Indonesia and China are now offering the Singapore syllabus. These Singapore International Schools are springing up across Asia.

Foreign students, Killian Wagner, Diego Seltz, Bahader Azad and Dominik Daniel, from Switzerland’s University of St Gallen are on a unique study trip to Singapore to research, study and get exposed to the Asian way of doing business.

Home Away From Home

The Singapore Scholarship Programme is a government-to-government initiative that provides students from member countries of ASEAN with a sound tertiary education in Singapore.

Aimed at providing good educational opportunities for bright young people in Southeast Asia, it equips scholars with the skills and knowledge to contribute towards the development of their home countries upon graduation.

Scholars take up courses such as accountancy, business administration, computer engineering, electrical and electronics engineering, pharmacy and physics at the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University or Singapore Management University.

The programme was launched by Singapore’s former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong during the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in December 1998 under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI). Scholarships cover tuition fees, return air tickets and living and accommodation allowances. A host family is assigned to each scholar to assist them with their integration into the Singapore education system.

Dr Quek Jin Jong, Dean (Academic) at the National Institute of Education, is one of those involved in the host family scheme this year. He spoke from his experience as an overseas undergraduate himself in his youth, and now, as head of a host family for ASEAN scholars.

“I have to say I was glad to arrive in the United States to find the host family waiting for me at the airport. They helped me to adapt to the American way. And that is exactly what I hope to do for these scholars. They are far away from home. The first few months are critical to help them adapt to the local culture.”

In fact, the programme has not only grown on the students. Host families are just as enthusiastic about the programme. Mr Tirmumalavan, a veteran host family participant in the programme from the start, has invited his other family members and friends to take up this meaningful service.

He said: “I once hosted a scholar from Vietnam whom we still keep contact with. She was like part of the family. In fact, she even invited us to her convocation ceremony.”

“My children also enjoy interacting with the scholars from the various countries. It is a great opportunity for them to learn about another country’s culture.”

Partnerships with Other Countries and Universities

Young people and teachers in Singapore and Indonesia can expect more opportunities to get to know each other, with the recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two countries.

The Singapore-Indonesia MOU on education sets out a comprehensive framework for cooperation, covering collaborations at all levels from school to university. These will range from exchanges of information to school-to-school linkages, joint student activities and research.

Said Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister for Education during the MOU signing ceremony: “I am confident that the MOU will pave the way for more people-to-people exchanges. These exchanges will benefit the students, teachers and officials from both countries, and ultimately lead to the further strengthening of the close relations between Indonesia and Singapore.”

Singapore's MOU with Indonesia is the latest in a series of agreements signed between its education ministry and its overseas counterparts. Singapore also has MOUs with China and the US.

Singapore’s tertiary institutions also regularly sign MOUs with overseas universities to enhance the Republic’s offerings in higher education. Recently, signed the MOU with Duke University in the US to establish a Graduate Medical School in Singapore.