Half of undergrads to spend time overseas

By Sandra Davie
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THEY may study locally, but Singapore's university students will be trained to "think globally", through overseas exposure.

By 2008, half of the undergraduate student population at the three local universities will head overseas on exchange programmes, or research or work attachments.

The Singapore Management University (SMU), which already sends 40 per cent of its 3,600 students overseas, said it can hit the 50 per cent mark by next year.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), which currently send 20 per cent of their students abroad, said they will reach the target in 2008.

Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam announced this yesterday at a global education convention at NUS. He also said overseas stints will give students "exposure to different methods of thinking, and develop cultural sensitivity and flexibility".

"It instils respect for perspectives and lifestyles that are different from our own."

He said he could not stress enough the importance of thinking global, in the new world where all countries are interdependent.

He told the 200 students and staff from 48 countries gathered that, as the educated elite, they have the responsibility to "expand the space that they share, regardless of race, culture and religion".

"Integration, mutual respect and mutual understanding between different peoples must win out over the fragmentation and isolation of minds," said Mr Tharman.

He said the best universities will not only educate their students academically, but also imbue them with a strong sense of responsibility, as citizens of their own countries and the world.

NUS president Shih Choon Fong said the 2008 target is very achievable, because of the alliances that the university is building.

It already has partnerships with more than 200 universities around the world, and students can spend between a semester and two years overseas.

He said the university is also raising funds from its alumni and companies to make these overseas stints affordable for students.

Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Kishore Mahbubani gave the keynote address for the convention. He said that, increasingly, even the most powerful countries see the need to develop an understanding of the rest of the world.

"For a small country like Singapore, it is not an option, it is a necessity," he said.

And speaking from experience, the former Singapore ambassador to the United Nations said that the best way to develop this understanding is to spend time overseas.

But he hoped that it would be a "two-way street", with foreign students also coming to NUS, NTU and SMU.