SMU's study abroad schemes expanding

It celebrates having more than 100 partner institutions globally for its exchange programmes

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WHEN the Singapore Management University (SMU) first began looking for partner universities for its student exchange programmes, it had no campus, no students and only a draft curriculum.

Yesterday, the five-year-old university celebrated its achievement in partnering more than 100 institutions from all corners of the globe.

And it has done so by going to all corners of the globe, literally.

It has study abroad schemes in countries such as Chile, Ecuador and Peru. And some of the universities that are not on the usual list of countries — the United States, Britain and Australia — are proving to be a hit with SMU’s students.

The Czech Republic’s Prague University of Economics, for example, sees as many applicants as that of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

“It seems to have become a fashionable destination. It’s a reputable university, courses are in English and it’s cheaper than going to the Eurozone countries,” the university’s international relations head Isabelle Malique told TODAY.

But it was tough going at the start. Its first partnership was with Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Japan. In its second year, SMU only sent five students abroad, to New Zealand and Canada.

It was only through personal contacts of the SMU management that the university could forge partnerships, said Ms Malique.

Then, the university began approaching foreign embassies and got some help from agencies like the Economic Development Board.

Now, it has 103 partners, including the Carnegie Mellon University in the US and the University of New South Wales in Australia.

In comparison, the National University of Singapore, whose student population is almost eight times that of SMU’s, has only double the number of partnerships.

SMU is sending 300 students abroad this year, almost half that of NUS.

“What I am most proud of, though, is that every applicant gets a placement and that 10 per cent of our students go for a second or even third exchange stint,” said Ms Malique. Many also apply for an extension of the exchange programme.

Now, SMU’s aim is to continue adding to its list of partner institutions so that it can increase the number of students it can send overseas to between 400 and 500.