First the businesses, now it's the students

SMU, NTU step up plans to attract students from the Middle East region

YOU may soon see more students with Arabic names studying at universities here and hanging out at Orchard Road.

An admissions team from Singapore Management University (SMU) leaves this week to visit three countries in the Gulf and the Middle East.

Its visit to Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, and the states of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, is a first for the university which currently has no students from the region on its rolls.

SMU intends to change that statistic by adopting the same recruitment strategy it has for countries nearer home.

That would mean on-the-ground, face-to-face recruitment drives and collaborations, which in recent months it has been conducting in eight major cities in China, four in India as well as in numerous townships in Indonesia.

The Middle East is the next link in the chain, revealed Mr Alan Goh, director of SMU’s office of undergraduate admissions.

“Moving forward, our foray into international markets can be characterised as such: Asean + 2 (China/India) + 4 (Middle East). More countries will be added into our sphere of reach as we make progress.”

The Nanyang Technological University (NTU) is not dragging its feet either.

Its dean of admissions, Professor Loh Nee Lai, revealed that there are plans to send faculty members to Middle Eastern universities to help promote NTU to students there.

The university is also exploring possible participation in educational fairs in the region.

The education sector here now seems ready to follow the business and political circles in seeking closer engagement with the Middle East.

It all began when then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong identified the region as one that Singapore had not paid sufficient attention to, and early last year, stepped up efforts to build ties through visits to Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain and Iran.

At the first session of the Asia-Middle East Dialogue this June, the panel discussions touched on educational exchanges.

Which is why SMU’s Mr Goh believes that “the time is appropriate” to explore opportunities.

Meanwhile, NTU has already been “following the government’s lead”, said Prof Loh. In April last year, the National Institute of Education (NIE) at NTU signed a memorandum of understanding with the Abu Dhabi Education Zone to facilitate greater exchange between NTU and Middle Eastern institutions.

That led NIE to offer short-term courses for teachers and leadership training programmes for principals and vice-principals from the region.

Top undergraduate students from Iranian universities are also offered the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) International Graduate Scholarships, for Masters programmes in biomedical or physical and engineering sciences.

The option to progress to PhD-level studies at NTU is available, added Prof Loh.

Meanwhile, the National University of Singapore has almost 300 students from the Middle East, comprising nearly five per cent of its international student population.

In comparison, NTU has currently some 30 Middle Eastern students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and in NIE’s preparatory course for teachers.

As for SMU, it will approach this week’s trip with its “eyes open”, said Mr Goh. It will firm up its strategy for the region only after that.