Think Singapore

Students in search of a quality education abroad need not travel very far from home

Story by DRIFT NIMANRORN

Vorapol Supanusonti, a second-year student at Singapore Management University (SMU), knows all about academic pressure and the amount of effort it takes to achieve the best in education. He is one of 57 students admitted to the Lee Kong Chian scholars programme, which awards up to 50 local and foreign students each year a full tuition fee, a monthly allowance, funded international exchange programmes, and a notebook computer allowance.

Vorapol’s academic prowess started early. After his British Mathayom 2 from Chitralada School, with an average GPA of 4.0, he was accepted (GPA of 4.4), the youngest and confident Vorapol left Thailand for Singapore, where he continued his secondary education at St Patrick’s School. “The academic system in Singapore is highly competitive, which puts a lot of pressure on the students at a very young age,” says Vorapol. “In order to gain acceptance into good schools, academic scores must be outstanding because the number of available seats at prestigious junior colleges or universities is limited,” he adds.

Small but competent

For decades, international commotion has been heard and Singapore has been known as one of Asia’s financial powerhouse, being a world country of only 5.2 million people, residing in a land of around 645 square kilometres, the country’s academic strength is that it is large in its education system. In fact, Singapore’s educational system is considered the best in the world by numerous international indices and more comparisons.

In the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), for example, Singaporean students ranked the highest scores on both maths and Science. The country is in the top ten among 41 other countries. At the university level, UK-based Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) rated National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore Polytechnic at the top of the Asia Pacific Universities. And the country’s more than 150 universities and polytechnic are also rated highly.

The difference between junior college and polytechnic is that while the junior college takes two years to complete, a polytechnic takes three years. At the end of either programme, students will take the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary (O-level) or ‘A’-level examinations. Compared to the ‘O’-level, students leaving junior colleges at this level are expected to perform significantly higher.

After taking the ‘O’ or ‘N’ Level, students have a number of options available to them, including junior college, pre-university, polytechnic, or Bachelor of Technical Education (BTE). A junior college means that you’ll want to continue in university level,” says Quok. “A polytechnic is in a three-year diploma programme. Then you start to work because it gives you the hands-on training, rather than just classroom instruction,” she adds.

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Open-minded scholarship policies

Because of its supportive policy on people development, the Singaporean government offers to pay 65 percent of the tuition fees for international students studying at the undergraduate level. This tuition grant is applicable to students from all nationalities who are studying at one of the three state universities, on a condition that they spend at least three years working for a Singaporean company after graduation.

"Having international students to come to Singapore will provide a diverse educational experience to everyone," says Quek. "It's not to say you are in Singapore, you have to learn it the Singaporean way."

In addition to the tuition grant, the Ministry of Education also provides an annual scholarship scheme for Asean students, which pays for accommodation, food (breakfast and dinner) provided by the hostel or boarding school, medical benefits and accident insurance, and school fees.

Besides the government-funded schemes, each national university provides a number of scholarship options to international students. SMU, for example, offers four other scholarship schemes, besides the Lee Kong Chian scholar programme. "The scholarship application process is highly competitive," says Ong Siying, assistant manager at SMU’s Office of Undergraduate Admissions. "Students from various nationalities as well as local students will be competing on equal ground," she adds. Students can apply for these scholarships along with their university applications.

For Thai students, Ong says, the university looks for the Mathayom 6 grade results and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. In addition, the application will require students to state their extracurricular activities and non-academic achievements outside classroom.

"We look at what we call a total individual, meaning that we look at two components: academic and non-academic achievements," Ong says. "If [the candidates] are shortlisted, we put them through an interview with our professors and faculty members. And that's when they will be processed based on their articulations, for example, their analytical skills and thought patterns," she adds.

Despite its generous scholarship and grant policies, Singapore’s education offers little chance for underachievers. The key to a successful academic endeavour in Singapore, says Vorapol, lies in early preparation and long-term planning. "If you are considering studying abroad, in Singapore or elsewhere, the sooner you prepare, the better. Language is not something that you can master in one or two days. "For the undergraduate studies, in particular, your English skills should be solid enough to allow you to debate in class discussions and express your own opinions," he adds.

For more information on education in Singapore, visit www.singaporeedu.gov.sg or call Singapore Education Services at 02-630-4774-6.