Several foreigners give top marks to attending school here, saying it has helped them fit easily into Singapore society.
**Nur Arnira Abdul Karim**

They speak excellent Singlish, attend our local schools and crave Singaporean dishes when they are abroad. However, while Jose Kasio, 22, Paolo Boquiren, 21, Patricia Shiu, 20, Sarah Kate Smith, 14, Shashank Nigam, 23, and Fong Chuan Jin, 20, live like Singaporeans, they are not actually locals.

They are among thousands of foreign students who grow up in Singapore and go through the Singapore education system. According to a Ministry of Education spokesman, 20,500 of the 530,000 students currently in our education institutions are foreign students. This figure amounts to about 4 per cent of total enrolment.

Some students, like Chuan Jin from Malaysia, are here on prestigious scholarships. The Accountancy undergraduate at Singapore Management University (SMU) came to Singapore from Kuala Lumpur on his own when he was 12 because he was awarded an ASEAN scholarship. He studied at Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) and St Andrew's Junior College.

Chuan Jin, who was born in North London where his father was working as an architect, says: "I've really grown up here. My years in ACS(I), especially, gave me an education and a sense of identity."

Other students, like Jose, Paolo, Sarah, Patricia and Shashank, are in Singapore because their parents are working here. Although their parents could afford to send them to an international school, they opted for the local system instead.

Paolo, a Filipino student who attended Chai Chee Secondary School, St Patrick's Secondary School and Tumines Junior College, says: "My parents decided that for the quality of education and the amount invested, going to a local school was a pretty good deal."

Jose, who is of French/Javanese parentage, arrived in Singapore when he was barely five years old. He attended Dover Court Preparatory School, Balestier Hill Secondary School and Nanyang Polytechnic.

He is now enrolled in the University at Buffalo in the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM) programme.

He experienced a dose of "culture shock" when he first attending Balestier Hill Secondary School.

Jose says: "The way people communicated, the slang, the lingo, was all alien to me. Coming from an international school, I was quite lost."

Still, he describes his secondary school years as his most memorable experience in Singapore.

"It was so exciting to learn a whole different culture. Being in Balestier Hill allowed me to mix with Singaporeans from all walks of life," says the French national who is now a "big fan of Singlish." Colloquialisms, however, can be a barrier.

Shashank, a third-year Information Systems and Business Management student at SMU, moved to Singapore when he was 12 years old.

The New Delhi native says: "I tried to blend in when I first arrived, but at first, no one understood my English and I didn't quite comprehend theirs either."

Similarly, Paolo's biggest problem was understanding the Singlish accent. He says: "I remember my first spelling test in Secondary One. I couldn't make out what the teacher was dictating so I got half of the words wrong."

However, despite these initial obstacles, the foreign students whom GEN Y spoke to believe that going to local schools has helped them assimilate into Singapore society.

Chuan Jin says: "We have common memories and experiences, like the O and A levels, so it's easier to relate to each other. Knowing what it feels like to go to school here makes bonding with peers much deeper."

Their Singaporean friends agree. Jo-ey Fang, 24, who attended Nanyang Polytechnic with Jose, says: "Even though Jose is proud of being French, he is so localised he is comfortable in any neighbourhood coffee shop, having a bowl of laksa."

Understanding the local context also helps bridge cultural gaps for Paolo and his local friends.

University student Wu Shuilian, 22, says: "Paolo gets it when we crack jokes about Singaporeans. That requires, for example, knowledge of local stereotypes."

These foreign students think they have not lost out by not enrolling in an international school.

Shashank says: "The quality of education in Singapore is excellent. I have been given so many opportunities to represent Singapore in conferences and competitions like the St Gallen's Symposium in Switzerland."

He was also one of two first-year students in Singapore to intern in global consultancy firm Accenture two years ago.

"The Singapore permanent resident (PR) says: "It gives me something to work towards. Everyone knows that the students in the Singapore system are on top of students from elsewhere."

Patricia, who was born in Hong Kong, agrees.

She has designed websites and corporate advertisements for the likes of ImagineWorks Asia and has received international acclaim for a comic strip that she designed for a campaign organised by SMU and the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore.

She says: "Friends and teachers are really supportive here. The recent boom in the arts scene has also been very encouraging for young artists like me."

Not surprisingly, these youngsters feel a deep sense of affection for Singapore.

Sarah does not consider herself foreign and calls Singapore her home. She speaks fluent Chinese and cannot imagine going without her favourite food — sambal stingray, chicken rice and hokkien mee.

"The Singapore permanent resident," says: "Having lived here so long, I feel like I am a stakeholder. Singapore's impact on foreign students extends beyond the classroom.

American citizen Barak Willoughby, 16, also a University at Buffalo in SIM student, was home-schooled yet professes that he is "culturally Singaporean."

The PR, whose parents helped to found the Tabernacle of Joy church on New Bridge Road, is looking forward to doing national service after he completes his degree course.

Having lived here for 13 years, Barak says: "I miss Singapore a lot when I visit the US. This is my home."

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