Life experiences not pre-wrapped like sushi

NE of the best decisions I’ve ever made was to attend the School of Information Systems at Singapore Management University (SMU) more than three years ago.

The second best decision I made was to apply for the international exchange programme.

I was blessed that my application was approved. Now I’ve come to understand all that is possible in university life.

You just need to be ready to find what you want and make it yours.

I am taking courses that I wouldn’t have been able to take in Singapore — everything from Latin American studies to globalisation and design.

Classes have been a revelation in themselves.

The technology and global development course is taught by four professors from different departments and there are only eight students in the class.

Another course, entrepreneurship for computer scientists, is taught by a professor who has set up a company that is now worth US$7 billion ($10.9b).

To make things even more exciting, the students are so enthusiastic — and it is infectious. Half have already started some kind of business and their contributions are amazing.

Yet, the most exciting part of the international exchange happens outside the classroom.

During our exchange students’ briefing, we were told that we can save on dinner every day by attending some event on campus that is serving free meals in the evening.

What we were not told was that we can probably have dinner five times over every day with the number of events that are going on.

The university life here is buzzing with activity.

At all times, someone is ready for a real conversation, someone is pouring all his energy into one of his many passions, and someone is creating something new.

This leaves the students with probably the most intellectually-stimulating, creative and open environment ever at an undergraduate institution.

If there is one lesson from the Americans that I am going to take back to Singapore with me, it is to take pride in your failures, and learn from them.

Success does not have to be the centre of the universe, as we have been repeatedly taught since childhood.

After all, big successes are built upon the lessons of bigger failures.

Another key feature in every exchange experience is the opportunity to travel.

My friends, who are currently in Europe, have travelled to more than five countries over the past couple of months. I have just been enjoying the fall colours in Canada and the US.

New York City never fails to surprise me every time I’m there; Philadelphia is the historical centre of the US — something I never knew before I visited it.

Students in Singapore universities have more opportunities than ever to engage in an overseas experience.

And what better way to do it than to go for a term of exchange. Not only will you widen your perspectives, you will forge some lifelong friendships too.

I have found countless ways to create an experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. And that’s the key.

University education won’t hand you an experience, pre-wrapped like a sushi. You’re going to have to go out and make it for yourself.

You’ve got to own it.

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