‘Small’ SMU is big at Tata

S’pore undergrads biggest group of foreign interns at Tata; more than half from SMU

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IT IS one of India’s oldest and largest conglomerates and has spread its operations to 54 countries across six continents.

The US$47.6-billion Tata Group has a special spot for Singapore though, and in particular, for Singapore’s university students.

While MBA students from prestigious universities like Harvard, Wharton and MIT regularly secure Tata internships, Singapore’s undergraduates have become the biggest group of foreign interns at the company.

Next year, 40 students from Singapore will join one of its 96 operating companies for their university internships. Of these, more than half will come from the youngest and smallest university, the Singapore Management University (SMU). In time, the number from SMU could increase further.

“We have the capacity to take four times more (SMU students),” said Mr Satish Pradhan, executive vice-president of group human resources for holding company Tata Sons. “It’s a question of finding the quality.”

According to Mr Pradhan, who was in town recently, Tata had been enjoying an “increasing receptivity and warmth” in Singapore – it acquired NatSteel in 2004 – when it decided to look for "opportunities" for its prized international internship programme.

To underline how seriously the company takes the programme, the HR chiefs of Tata’s respective companies personally interview potential interns in their home countries.

SMU impressed the company with the “enthusiasm and momentum generated by its newness and the freshness of its people and approach”, he told Today.

The number of SMU interns rose from six last year to 15 this year.

For next year’s internship, 80 SMU students applied and 24 were selected.

“I don’t know what SMU’s charms are, but I’ve got feedback, very encouraging feedback. All three universities are good,” said Mr Pradhan, who also cited Cornell-Nanyang Institute of Hospitality Management students who intern at Tata’s hotel group, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces.

For the SMU interns, many of them were given projects to do for Tata’s various companies. For example, business student Han Ping Ping, 21, was asked to produce a “100-per cent action plan” to increase synergy between the reservation, banquets, revenue and sales and marketing department of the Taj Mahal Taj Palace in New Delhi.

Ms Han said: “I had to write three manuals, one of them more than 100 pages. And I’ve been told the staff now refer to it.”

Business student Emily Pan, 21, who joined a product development team at Tata Chemicals to market “salt fortified with iron”, also experienced Mumbai’s floods after having to wade through the city’s streets chest-high in water.

She also escaped the Mumbai bomb blasts earlier this year when she left the train station one hour before the explosion occurred.

Still, she described her internship as “a dream come true”.

She said: “I will never look at India in the same way again. Incredible India indeed.”