University reading that's not 'cheem'

THREE pages explaining Singlish expressions like “boh chup”, “cheem” and “tompang” as well as tips on how to gel with Singaporeans – are some elements in Not A Stuffy Guide, a handbook for foreign students.

Straightforward and in-your-face, the book is geared towards foreign students of the Singapore Management University (SMU), complete with a list of campus-held events, tips on course selection, a campus map and even locations of photocopiers.

The 80-page book, written by SMU students, also introduces readers to the festivals, transportation system, accommodation and medical services in Singapore.

Since August, each incoming foreign SMU student has been given a copy free of charge.

The 1,000 copies that were printed are expected to last for two more years. After they run out, the guide book will be updated and reprinted.

What began as a laundry list in February had by July evolved into its present form: A guide to help international freshmen settle in at SMU and Singapore.

Miss Teresa Thoppil, 22, one of the book’s editors said: “I was once lost, disoriented and hopelessly homesick after being thrust into unfamiliar surroundings. A book like this would have helped me greatly. This is one of the reasons I decided to be involved.”

So the Indian national, who works for a bank since she graduated from SMU in May, worked with nine other students to amass information, brainstorm on how it should be presented and surveyed 150 foreign students to pinpoint difficulties they face.

Their efforts yielded more than information. The team stumbled upon willing sponsors, including The National Museum of Singapore, The Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra Society, Rendezvous Hotel, Singapore Crocodile, Cafe Le Claire and Katong Antique House – who fronted about 16 per cent of the book’s total cost.

The university did not want to reveal its cost, but said the rest of its production costs came from SMU’s international student affairs unit.

Ms Elain Sirin, 35, who oversees international student affairs at SMU said: “All the effort put in was worth it. The international students really like the book. Even the seniors are saying they wish there was something like that when they came in!”

For foreign student Richard Edmunds, 18, the guide came as a relief. Unfamiliar with lingo and customs, the South African freshman found explanations in the chapters covering local customs and cultural festivals.

He arrived in Singapore early this year, and after reading it felt “the guidebook made me feel more comfortable. It gave a local aspect and the student slant made it that much more helpful than a guidebook found at a bookstore”. JESSICA LIM

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