Local unis should have Middle East expertise

THE growing importance of the Middle East region – economically, politically, even culturally – is an issue few would dispute. Our government ministers have recently made prominent visits to the region, and Arabic is soon to be offered at the Ministry of Education Language Centre. As I have great interest in this region, I was heartened by these positive moves by the Government, made in a trademark prescient and pragmatic style.

Yet I have noticed that none of our three main universities has a Middle East studies department. I understand there are logistical, administrative and practical constraints, but perhaps a possible expansion in this aspect could be a consideration of the Government before embarking on the fourth university project.

I am also concerned by the relative scarcity of formal relations for student exchange programmes between local universities and Middle East ones, compared to other regions.

Singapore Management University has the most encouraging Middle East prospect, with formal relations with a Turkish university (whose language of instruction is English) and a Jordanian one. The National University of Singapore (NUS) has relations only with an Israeli university – Israeli-Technion, whose language of instruction is Hebrew – while the Nanyang Technological University website does not show formal relations with any Middle East university.

I feel Singapore will need its own expertise in these strategic areas in the near future. We will need people who can speak Arabic, Farsi or Urdu, who can liaise with businesses and schools in this large part of West Asia and North Africa.

I am a first-year NUS student and have been learning Arabic at Al-Markaz Centre since January this year.

When I mooted my idea of going to the Middle East on an exchange programme, I was advised to consider Israel, because although the school viewed the Middle East as a priority, it did not consider formal tie-ups and exchange trips there a priority now or in the near future.

(While I find Israel interesting, I am more interested in the predominantly Muslim societies in the region.)

When I e-mailed the faculty to ask about a resurrection of the Middle East studies department closed down a few years ago, I was told the same thing – not likely in the near future.

I urge the Government to provide funding or blueprints for development in this area, where there is a confluence between demand and curiosity at ground level, and policy direction at state level.

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