FOR two weeks last month, fourth-year Singapore Management University (SMU) student Debra Lau, 22, felt like a full-time mother.

She waited while her charges underwent medical check-ups, taught them the local lingo and even lent them her mobile phone for a day because she was worried that they might get lost while wandering around on their own.

"At the end of each day, they would call from their hostel and excitedly tell me about what they saw around Singapore, as though they were reporting to their mum," she said.

Debra volunteered to be a "buddy" to the incoming students after returning from her own six-month exchange programme in Paris in June.

Talking with them gave her a vicarious experience of travelling to Israel, she said.

Employers, too, are giving the thumbs-up to staff with global connections, said students.

One-way exchange students say it’s a rewarding experience and helps them expand their network of friends.

Debbie Yong

Contact Singapore

Global connections by reaching out to exchange students in their schools in the hope that it will give them an edge in the working world.

Since its founding in 2000, SMU's club Icon, which organises activities that bring local and international students together, has seen its membership grow to 200.

At National University of Singapore (NUS), a programme called the Icare project also organises social events and pairs up local and exchange students as buddies. It is run by students.

Nanyang Technological University (NTU), too, has student volunteers who welcome incoming international students.

"Even if you're not working overseas, you're bound to have colleagues from all over the world next time," said SMU economics and politics student Benjamin Mai, 23, a member of Icon.

"So what better time to start befriending them than in an informal setting like school, where there are no workplace pressures like stiff competition and tight deadlines?"

He plays tour guide to friends he made during his summer exchange programmes in Switzerland, South Korea and Hong Kong when they visit Singapore.

He takes them on sightseeing trips to spots off the beaten track — such as an underground club in Cascadren Road or potl performance in the heartland — for a taste of real Singaporean life.

Interacting with foreign students also gives the Singaporean hosts insights into the countries that their visitors come from.

When Teo Wan Yuan, 22, found out that she had to host five exchange students from Israel this year, she searched the Internet for information on supermarkets that sell kosher food in Singapore.

"I didn't even know exactly what 'kosher' meant until then," said Wan Yuan, who also took her guests to two Jewish synagogues — on Oxley Rise and Waterloo Street.

Talking with them gave her a vicarious experience of travelling to Israel, she said.

Employers, too, are giving the thumbs-up to staff with global connections.

Exposure to different cultures at an early age definitely gives young people an advantage in life, said Mr Douglas Foo, CEO of Apex-Pal.

"As a company, we will be glad to give opportunities to staff who have experience and networks in countries that we are thinking of expanding into," he said.

But it’s not all about contact-building for the future; a big reason is still to help and make friends, said students.

Many of the students have gone out of their way to help their visitors.

For example, Amy Wan, 22, put up an exchange student at her home for two days last year and NUS law student Lin Shumin, who had never house hunted before, spent two harried days poring over classified ads and calling up at least 30 housing agents to find accommodation for French classmate Loic Villechabane, who is currently on a one-year law exchange programme at NUS.

Exchange students, in turn, are glad for this kind of friendship and help.

Toni Starczewski, 22, a Finnish business student at SMU, said his elder brother Jani's experience with friendly Singaporeans convinced him to apply for an exchange programme here.

His brother came to NTU on a one-year exchange programme last year and enjoyed it so much that he extended his stay to work for Nokia Singapore.

"Like him, I hope to continue making more Singaporean friends while I'm here, and stay in touch with them when I return home," said Toni, who is studying at SMU until December.