I REFER to Miss Koh Choon Hwee’s letter, ‘Local unis should have Middle East Expertise’ (ST, Sept 24), and Miss Sharifah Hanan Alsagoff’s letter, ‘Group set up to create awareness about Middle East’ (ST, Sept 28).

The growing importance of the Middle East has attracted much attention from all over the world. Aside from businesses, many academic institutions are also interested. Fine examples of such institutions are the Singapore Management University (SMU), the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Raffles Junior College (RJC).

This was turned into action in May when SMU’s undergraduates embarked on the university’s first Business Study Mission (BSM) to the Middle East. I was very fortunate to be a part of the one-week study trip to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar to study the business environment in the Gulf region.

Using a country-specific study as its base, the BSM course examines the rapidly developing business environment of, and the available opportunities in, the Gulf region, with particular emphasis on the socio-political, cultural, legal environments, and the influence they exert on business practices through case studies, student projects and guest lectures.

The course culminates in a trip to the location itself, and includes site visits, networking sessions and presentations by prominent individuals in the region from both private and public sectors. This BSM to the Middle East is one in a long list of study missions that SMU regularly sends its students every semester to key business hubs such as Argentina, Chile, China, New York, Spain, Germany, Thailand and India.

As Minister of State for Trade and Industry Lee Yi Shyan said during the inaugural launch of BSM UAE and Qatar on May 14: ‘Singapore should plug into high-growth economies such as the Middle East to accelerate its own growth.’ Participating students returned with a wealth of knowledge, not just of the region’s business developments and the lessons that can be drawn from them, but also of the rich culture and history of the area. Six of my classmates even stayed on to serve their internships in Dubai, and all of us had the opportunity to extend our personal networks to the region.

SMU is organising its second BSM to the Middle East next year to the UAE and Bahrain. Work is in progress to secure guest speakers, company visits and internship opportunities. Besides formal academia, the students will also learn basic Arabic and have a chance to be introduced to the rich Middle East culture.

All these efforts will allow students in Singapore to explore the career opportunities in the region and, perhaps, be a part of the developments in future.

Febrianto Pratama Wisnata (Mr)