SMU’s creative approach draws foreign students

BY JANE NG & SUMATHI V. SELVARETNAM

IN ITS early years, the Singapore Management University (SMU) had difficulty attracting students from overseas.

Initially, such students were more enamoured of its bigger counterparts, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University, and were drawn by their brand names.

Then, two years ago, SMU took a different tack. For example, to attract Vietnamese students, it decided to invite principals of top high schools in the country to visit its campus and attend lessons.

Now, students from all over China, India and, yes, Vietnam, hardly need persuading to apply for a place at SMU – 19 per cent of its cohort are foreigners, just shy of the 20 per cent cap.

The success of SMU and other educational institutions and individuals in attracting foreigners and moving Singapore closer to its goal of becoming a “global schoolhouse” was celebrated at a ceremony last night organised by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB).

At the event, held at the Raffles Hotel, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, said Singapore was on track to achieving its target of getting 150,000 foreign students here by 2015.

Dr Balakrishnan, who is also the Second Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, pointed out that 86,000 overseas students were here already – a figure that is more than halfway to the target.

But, he added, more is being done to draw such students here. Citing measures to tighten the private education sector and make it more competitive, such as the new private education Act, the EduTrust accreditation scheme and the setting up of the Council for Private Education, he said: “These measures will help augment our strong reputation for being the destination for quality education.”

Meanwhile, several government agencies, including the STB, will meet in June to discuss more ways to regulate the sector.

Guidelines are expected early next year.

At last night’s ceremony, Singapore Education Awards were given to 17 individuals and organisations.

SMU’s efforts to attract overseas students here and help them settle in – by offering extra lessons in English, for example – won it the award for “Best International Marketing Effort by a Public Educational Institution”.

Other winners included NUS, which was named the “Best Host for International Students” studying here, and individuals such as Mr Nithiwat Chaichanasiri, 37, who won the “Best Singaporean Education Specialist Award for Thailand”, for his efforts in promoting Singapore schools to parents and students in Thailand.

GOOD “FOREIGN POLICY”: SMU won the award for “Best International Marketing Effort by a Public Educational Institution”.