Korean students turn to Singapore for quality education

By JEFF HAN

SINGAPORE — South Korean students, who usually study abroad in major cities in North America or Europe after finishing high school in the United States, are turning to Singapore for quality education.

"The education systems in both countries are very similar to American ones, but they provide in-depth study of what's really important and then provide a broader understanding of the world," one senior said about the education program in Singapore.

"Singapore is no longer considered the first stop for foreign students looking to study abroad. In February of 2008, over 3,000 students under the age of 18 studying abroad, over 2,000 of whom attended the American schools in Singapore," he added.

According to the data from the Korean Embassy in Singapore, about 300 Korean students study at the American schools in Singapore, which is about 10 percent of the total number of students, followed by other private language schools.

Kim Eun-jeong, a junior at the American School in Singapore, said she plans to study at the National University of Singapore as an exchange student. "I fell in love with the campus and the city when I visited it in the summer of 2007. I have a lot of friends from different countries, and the school has a global perspective," she said.

Kim Tae-jeong, a junior at the Singapore American School, said she plans to study at the Singapore Management University. "I love the city and the campus. It's a great place to study and have fun," she said.

"I have already decided to study in Singapore, and I will be there in September," one senior said.

In order to study in Singapore, students need to pass the SATs and PSATs, and have a good command of English. According to the data from the Singapore Principals' Academy, there are about 500 Asian students who study in Singapore every year.

Kim Eun-jeong added, "I think the Singaporean education system is great, and I want to study here because I love the city and the culture. I'm really excited about the opportunity to study in Singapore."
SINGAPORE - Suh Dong-hyun, a business administration major at Singapore Management University, is one of many Korean students who chose to study overseas at an early age. He decided to move to Singapore after finishing high school in the United States. It was Singapore’s practical education system that attracted Suh to this tiny Asian city state.

"The education system here is very similar to American one but they provide in-depth studies on Asia’s real economy and finance. And I also like the fact that it’s cheaper and closer to Korea,” Suh said.

Singapore was a relatively uncommon destination for those looking to study abroad. In February of 2006, over 35,000 students under the age of 18 were outside the country to study overseas. About 35 percent of them, or some 13,000 students, headed to the United States, followed by other popular destinations like China and Canada.

According to the data at the Korean Embassy in Singapore, about 3,300 Korean students under the age of 18 are estimated to be studying here as of September in 2007. The number of full-time college students is estimated to be around 500. The exact number is expected to be bigger, as it does not include the number of students enrolled at private language institutions.

Singapore’s bilingual environment, multicultural yet safe atmosphere, proximity and reasonable prices are some of the reasons that draw Korean students and parents to this country. But most of all, it’s the schools’ international degree programs with American or European schools that attract Korean students here. Most of the students interviewed by The Korea Herald said that they were planning to work in the United States after graduation.

Lim Jae-hwan, a freshman at Singapore Institute of Management, will graduate with a bachelor’s degree in business from the State University of New York at Buffalo. SIM, Singapore’s No. 1 private university, offers overseas degree programs through partnerships with universities in the United States, Britain, Australia and Switzerland. The number of international students at SIM jumped to 2,500 as of 2008 from 400 of 2003. This makes up one quarter of the total number of students.

By taking advantage of the school’s flexible system, Lee will graduate in 3 years, including a year of exchange program in New York. He said he was planning to be a certified accountant in the United States after graduation. “I can study business in English without having to go to the United States and I’ll still graduate with a degree from SUNY,” he said.

Suh of Singapore Management University said that the school’s up-to-date programs have made itself stand out among globally prestigious ones. SMU is one of the world’s first universities to introduce wealth management and investment banking courses at undergraduate level, with a focus on Asian markets.

He plans to do an MBA in the United States and find a job in an international consulting firm. Suh said that Singapore’s strength is in practical education and its internationally acclaimed educational infrastructure, not in the languages that are spoken there. “I wouldn’t recommend people to come here to study Chinese or English. But if you want an international exposure in a safe environment, you should come here,” he said.
Kim Eun-jin, a junior at Seoul-based Korea University, came to study at the National University of Singapore as an exchange student. Kim, who initially wanted to study in the United States said she is now happy with her decision to come here. "Compared to my friends studying in America or Europe, I spend less time at parties and spend more time studying. And you never see drugs or racism here," she said. Kim is planning to get a job in the marketing sector and said her experience here will benefit her career. "It is fun to interact with students from 80 countries and also brush up on my English."

In order to enter Singapore’s public universities, one needs to submit a U.S. scholastic aptitude test part I score or its equivalent, and an IETLS or TOEFL score. Or they can apply for the increasing number of exchange student programs already established by many universities in Korea.

The situation is a little different among basic level education. Students to elementary or secondary schools are required to prove their proficiency in English and math by taking exams at individual schools. This means that one already needs to have a good command of English in order to study there.

According to the data at Singapore Principals Academy in Seoul, there are about 1,500 Korean students under the age of 18 going to Singapore to study every year. However, there are many students who end up studying English at private English institutions for a year or two and coming back to Korea. "Some children spend as much as 70 million won a year and they still can’t get into schools there," said Julia Park, manager at the academy.

"About one out of 20 applicants enter public schools. Many Korean students fail to enter public schools because their English or math scores aren’t good enough for their standards," said Helen Ahn, a local guardian of Korean students. She said many Koreans go to international schools even though the curriculum is almost the same as the public ones. "The tuition at public schools is about SG$100 a month, which is only one tenth of what you pay at international schools," she said.

Dr. John Barrett, principal at Singapore’s ACS International School, says many that Korean students face a language barrier when they first come to Singapore. But he said most schools had bridging programs to help students adjust faster. "But you do need a certain level of English," he added.

Tan Chai Hok, vice principal at Bowen Secondary School, said that there are about five Korean students in his school who initially struggled to fit in. "We don’t accept students who we think can not handle classes in English. The Korean students we have now are excellent students," he said.

Lorna Whiston, a well-known figure of English education in Singapore, said that Korean students are enthusiastic about their studies but they end up staying with Koreans and speaking Korean all the time. "Singapore is a great place to mingle with international students and Korean students should take advantage of this chance."

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