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NUS student Ms Ng was drawn to the experiential learning opportunities offered by the SAS programme. Here she is photographed on the Trolltunga in Norway. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JASLYN NG





Left: Ms Ng (at far left) with American friends (from left) Ashley Everett, Sara Thornburg and Lissette Palestro. Right: On board the ship, Ms Ng shared a room with American Christine Rominski. Their cabin is decorated with flags and postcards of countries that they had travelled to.

Semester at sea buoys learning for undergrads

Programme on 'floating uni' allows students to sail around the world while taking classes

Yuen Sin

For three months during the summer of 2014, National University of Singapore (NUS) student Jaslyn Ng, 24, sailed and studied on a former cruise ship while touring 10 countries in Europe.

She was one of the students on a semester-long, study-abroad programme accredited by the University of Virginia in the United States.

Started in 1963, the Semester at Sea (SAS) programme sends up to 600 students and staff on voyages around the world each semester. Places it has travelled to include Hawaii, Morocco, Ghana, Ecuador, Mauritius and South Africa.

NUS, which is one of the more than 300 universities which accept academic credits transferred from the programme, said 15 of its students have embarked on journeys with the "floating university" since 2010. At least 10 other Singaporean students from other local and overseas universities have also joined the programme in recent years.

A typical 10-week summer voyage costs about US$13,950 (S$19,600), but there are grants and study awards available for students.

Ms Ng, who is now in the fourth year of her life sciences degree, said she was drawn by the experiential learning opportunities offered by the programme.

There was also a greater sense of camaraderie on the programme. "It was easy to approach professors and have a chat or a meal with them – it was all very communal," she said.

Professor Michael Maniates, who heads environmental studies at Yale-NUS College, has taught on six SAS voyages since 2001.

Initially sceptical about the programme, which "sounded more like a party than a serious academic endeavour", he became convinced of its value after seeing his students' progress.

"I saw more growth among the students with whom I worked in one semester than I often see in my best students over four years of regular university," he said.

Each student takes three to four courses on the voyage, including a Global Comparative Lens course that aims to deepen students' understanding of life and culture in the countries visited.

They also have to go on field trips, during which they apply what they have learnt in classes on the ship to the countries they visit. This takes advantage of students' natural curiosity about the places that they are visiting, said Prof Maniates.

For example, a seminar on the politics of South Asia that he taught in 2001 "grew more intense as we approached India, and was especially insightful and reflective in the weeks after our week in the subcontinent".

He added that courses that take an explicitly comparative approach fare especially well.

"The ports of call become the raw material and inspiration for doing deep and rich comparison," added Prof Maniates.

The ship stopped in Singapore in 2014, during which NUS hosted a networking session for SAS participants and NUS students. Some notable names who have given guest lectures on the programme include South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Nobel laureate, and Cuba's former president and revolutionary icon Fidel Castro.

However, the "less is more" focus is not for everyone, warned Prof Maniates.

"It requires a commitment to community and the capacity to be flexible, like the time my entire class and I had to do our lesson sitting on the floor because of rough seas.

"It's also usually the case that SAS courses don't cover as much material as 'normal' courses back home, though what is covered is dealt with intensely and deeply, and emphasised or tested by travel in port."

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VALUE FROM PROGRAMME

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PROFESSOR MICHAEL MANIATES, from Yale-NUS College. He has taught on six SAS voyages since 2001.

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