

Uni students go overseas as exchange programmes resume

No drop in demand from S'pore as thousands apply amid easing of Covid-19 border curbs

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University students are heading overseas again as schools gradually resume exchange programmes, with countries easing border curbs.

Demand for overseas experiences has not abated, with thousands applying for such programmes, which had been suspended since March 2020 because of Covid-19.

Local institutions told *The Straits Times* that some students went abroad last month, and more are set to do so in the coming months.

About 120 students from the National University of Singapore (NUS) headed overseas between last October and January under the NUS Overseas Colleges programme, a work-study entrepreneurial stint. An NUS spokesman said its student exchanges also resumed last month, with some 1,000 students travelling this semester.

Similarly, about 450 students from Singapore Management University (SMU) are going on exchanges, with some flying out as early as last December.

It has resumed exchange programmes with about 95 per cent of its 220 partner universities across 45 countries and regions.

SMU has seen more interest from students – 700 have applied from last December, 30 per cent higher than pre-pandemic numbers.

Nine students from Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) began their eight-month immersion programme at the University of California, Berkeley, in the United States last month, as part of SUTD's technology entrepreneurship programme.

An SUTD spokesman said it has partnerships with 21 countries, and that before Covid-19, it would have sent about 73 per cent of its students in a cohort for programmes abroad. The institution has a cohort size of about 500 students.

Professor Tan Ooi Kiang, deputy provost for education at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said 1,800 students have applied for exchanges in the upcoming academic year, which starts in August.

This is about 60 per cent of the number of applications the university would receive before the pandemic, he noted. NTU has overseas tie-ups with more than 330 partner



universities in over 40 countries.

The Singapore Institute of Technology has, since last December, opened applications for overseas programmes such as work-study stints, immersion and student exchanges, which are set to resume from the first quarter of this year.

A handful of Singapore University of Social Sciences students left last month for overseas work attachments or semester exchange programmes. Most of its overseas programmes are still being held virtually, through workshops or group discussions, a spokesman said.

"Partnership discussions on overseas academic exchanges are still ongoing, with many partner universities in Asia-Pacific remaining cautious on student mobility programmes," he added.

In the months ahead, SMU aims to match 50 students with companies as part of a global innovation immersion programme, with a

three-month internship with high-growth start-ups in hot spots like China, South-east Asia, the US and Europe. Last year, 45 students took part in the programme, conducted virtually by the SMU Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

SMU third-year student Clarissa Neo, 22, started her exchange at Oregon State University in the US last month. "From the process of application to the flight, there was always this uncertainty about whether the exchange would be confirmed or cancelled," said the double major in politics, law and economics, and finance.

She is also exploring a three-month global internship that SMU offers, in China or Hong Kong.

"It depends on the travel rules and my personal timeline, but for now, I'm very grateful to be on exchange," she said.

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Singapore Management University third-year student Clarissa Neo started her exchange at Oregon State University in the US last month. She is also exploring a three-month global internship that SMU offers, in China or Hong Kong. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CLARISSA NEO

Universities take precautions, provide support

Students embarking on overseas programmes planned by their universities in Singapore must be fully vaccinated and have parental consent.

The local institutions said those going abroad are covered by student travel insurance policies and the coverage includes expenses for Covid-19 treatment.

A National University of Singapore (NUS) spokesman said it conducts pre-departure briefings for students to ensure they are aware of the current developments in the country and partner university they are heading to.

“They must also complete and pass a compulsory travel preparedness module, and submit a risk acknowledgement and consent form signed by their parent or guardian,” she added. “Prior to their departure, they will need to e-register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and upload their travel itinerary onto the International SOS portal, so that support can be swiftly provided if the need arises.”

The overseas programmes of all universities here were suspended from March 2020 because of Covid-19. NUS resumed student exchanges last month and some 1,000 students will be travelling this semester.

A Singapore Management University (SMU) spokesman said its students’ health and safety are its top priority, and they are allowed to travel only to countries deemed safe by the Health Ministry at the time of travel. “The university has made provision for all students embarking on overseas travel to be able to utilise the International SOS’ global assistance programme,” she added.

About 450 SMU students are going on exchange this semester, and some flew out as early as last December.

Professor Tan Ooi Kiang, deputy provost for education at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said students are required to attend pre-departure briefings and complete risk assessment modules.

NTU will be gradually resuming its exchange programmes in the new academic year starting in August.

A Singapore Institute of Technology spokesman said it is working with its overseas university partners to ensure contingency measures are in place to cater to students in case they are infected while abroad. These include quarantine and hospitalisation protocols, as well as lesson continuity via virtual platforms.

Its students are expected to start travelling from the first quarter of this year.

Some universities added that they are still relying on remote means of conducting certain programmes.

The SMU spokesman said it plans to continue with virtual internships this year, to allow students the flexibility of working with international companies without taking on the risk of travel and uncertain border control situations.

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