S’poreans flocking overseas to study

Weak currencies and high-ranking universities draw them to UK, US

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SUNDAY WRITER

DESPITE the expansion of university places here, Singaporeans are flocking to the United States and Britain, drawn by the weaker currencies and high-ranking universities.

This year, more than 4,500 of them are enrolled in American institutions, the highest figure in 11 years, according to Open Doors, a publication that tracks international student movements.

About half are undergraduates, with the majority enrolled in undergraduate degree courses.

For Britain, the enrolment figure also reached a record high of 4,840 last year, according to the British Council Singapore, with the majority enrolled in undergraduate degree courses.

The universities with the most Singaporean students are among the most prestigious. They include Stanford, Harvard, Cornell and the University of California, Berkeley in the US, and Cambridge, Oxford and Imperial College in Britain.

Education counselors report, however, that an increasing number of Singaporeans are also taking the road less travelled to the liberal arts colleges and art and design schools.

Singaporean students and their parents say the lower cost of education is the main reason they are heading overseas.

Businessman Milton Tan, 49, whose son and daughter are at British universities, said: “My daughter can get a law degree in three years and my poly grad son, an engineering degree from Imperial in three years. My son could have easily got a place at the Singapore Institute of Technology, but it is not quite an Imperial College degree. And all this at a discount, because of the cheaper pound.”

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and the Singapore University of Technology and Design are two of the universities that have been set up to offer places for up to 30 per cent of university-age Singaporeans by 2020.

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Recently, the Government announced it was adding more places and courses at SIT and offering full-time degree programmes at SIM University to raise the university participation rate to 40 per cent by 2020.

Mr Kelly Koh, the British Council’s director of education, said that because of currency fluctuations, since 2008, the cost of studying in Britain has dropped by 35 per cent for Singapore students.

“Others say that with more Singaporeans going to university, a brand-name degree will give them the edge. National serviceman Adrian Toh, 20, who wants to study at one of the Ivy League colleges, said: “A garden-variety degree won’t do any more. You have to have something more. So having a degree from a top-notch institution will be an advantage.”