



INTERNATIONAL Students in NUS

Ms Geraldine Lee
Office of Student Affairs

Over the last two years, there has been a significant increase in the number of international students in NUS. As of July 2000, matriculated international students numbered approximately 7,050 (3,350 undergraduates and 3,700 postgraduates). Enrolment is expected to increase as NUS strives to make 20% of the undergraduate student population international.

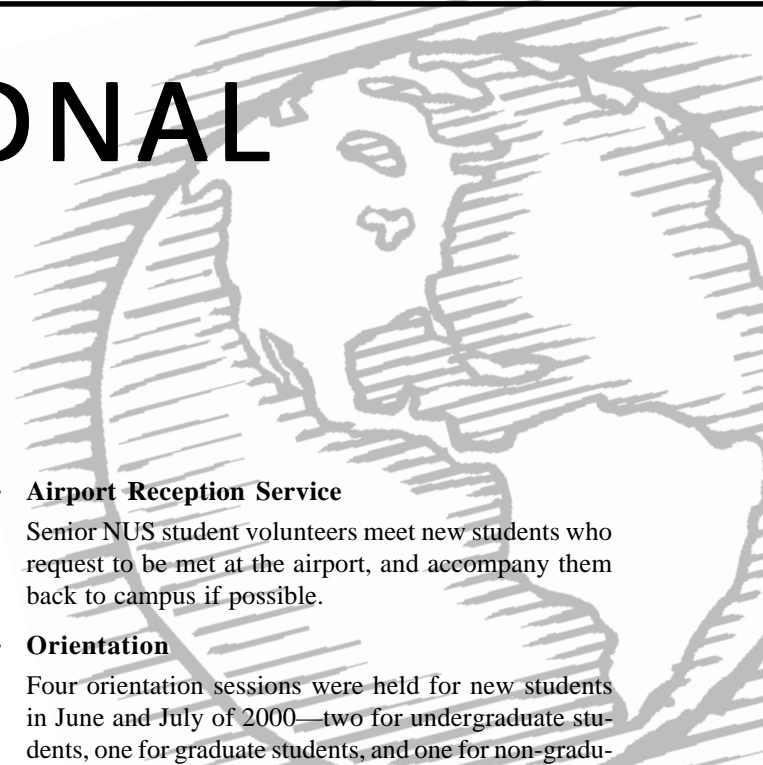
Our international students hail from over 25 different countries, with some from as far away as Russia and Mexico. With NUS' active Student Exchange Programme, we also find on campus an additional 400 non-graduating international students from an even wider array of countries each year. An impromptu show of hands during last year's orientation for non-graduating students revealed a representation of over 35 countries.

The increase in the intake of international students has required an expansion of university student housing. 499 single rooms on campus were recently added to the existing 2,794 places provided by the six halls of residence on campus. The Prince George's Park housing complex, which is currently undergoing construction, is expected to add 2,850 new rooms when completed in 2001.

The challenges faced by international students studying at NUS are varied. The obvious difficulties are language, food, culture, homesickness, and having to relearn things locals take for granted, like how to use public transportation, make phone calls, what food to eat, and where to purchase their necessities.

The Office of Student Affairs (OSA) has responded to the increase in international students by setting up the International Student Services (ISS) unit with three full-time staff members dedicated to the welfare of international students. Some of our programmes and services are listed as follows:

- **Airport Reception Service**
Senior NUS student volunteers meet new students who request to be met at the airport, and accompany them back to campus if possible.
- **Orientation**
Four orientation sessions were held for new students in June and July of 2000—two for undergraduate students, one for graduate students, and one for non-graduating students. During these sessions, NUS administrative departments, Ministry of Education, Contact Singapore, Jurong Town Corporation, and NUSSU conducted presentations on their respective functions and highlighted relevant issues for new students, (e.g. Student's Pass (visa) application, medical insurance, Tuition Grant, etc.). There was also a separate orientation organised by the Council of International Students for international freshmen. It consisted of a walking tour of the various faculties, a brief bus tour of some parts of Singapore, and a casual buffet dinner with other international freshmen.
- **Host Family Programme**
New students are matched with Host Family volunteers who are made up of faculty, alumni, and other members of the Singapore community. This programme is set up to welcome students into the life of a family living in Singapore and to provide opportunities to exchange viewpoints and attitudes on how arts and culture differ between countries.
- **Informational materials**
A comprehensive guidebook consisting of information that new students will need whilst studying in NUS and living in Singapore (e.g. health, immigration, banking, accommodation, transportation, etc.) and pre-departure information is printed yearly by OSA and distributed to all new international students. When they attend ori-



entation, all new international students are also given an information pack which includes walking guides of local places of interest, information on places of worship, etc.

- **International Friendship**

New students who ask for an International Friendship partner will be matched with senior students (both local and international) who have volunteered to help new students adjust by answering questions and accompanying them off campus when necessary during their first month here. Students are encouraged to continue their friendship beyond this initial period.

- **International Student Advisory Service**

Three full-time staff members are dedicated to look into the welfare issues of international students who may seek help from them on anything and at any time. Referrals can be made when necessary.

- **Farewell teas for exchange students**

Toward the end of each semester, farewell teas are organised for exchange students to allow them an opportunity to bid goodbye to one another and for OSA to learn more about their experiences at NUS and in Singapore. This feedback is helpful as NUS expands the

Student Exchange Programme to 600 students annually.

- **Formation of the Council of International Students (CIS)**

CIS is an informal group made up of senior international students who come together to volunteer assistance to new international students and to promote interaction between international and local students. The group reports directly to OSA.

- **Student's Pass (visa) applications**

ISS provides information, advice, and forms, as well as collects Student's Pass applications from students and submits them to Singapore Immigration and Registration on their behalf.

OSA has actively sought to promote the welfare and peace of mind of international students studying in NUS. The happiness of these students are vital as their presence contributes to NUS' standing as a world-class university and enhances the global flavour of its campus life by giving Singaporean students the opportunities to study and work with others from all over the world. As the international student population at NUS increases, OSA will continue to improve its support services for them. ■

Foreign Students in the Faculty of Business Administration

Associate Professor Tan Soo Jiuan, *Sub-Dean & Exchange Coordinator*
& **Ms Samantha Tay**, *Exchange Administrator*
Faculty of Business Administration

Introduction

The Faculty of Business Administration's (FBA's) first International Student Exchange Programme (SEP) was established in 1990. However, exchanges only commenced in 1993 when 9 students spent a semester abroad and 8 foreign students were hosted. Positive responses from early participants encouraged significant expansion in both the number of exchange partners and the numbers of students sent and hosted under the SEP.

By mid-2000, the FBA had established 45 student exchange agreements with universities in 19 countries. To date, we have received 494 students and sent away 414 students. For the July 2000 semester, we received 91 undergraduate and 32 postgraduate students from 25 countries.

What Foreign Students Can Expect at the FBA

At the FBA, foreign students are valued for their contributions to the diversity of the student body and in-class academic experience. To make the transition easier for foreign students, the FBA goes out of its way to ensure

that they are well looked after before and after they have arrived at the Faculty.

Prior to their arrival in Singapore, foreign students are sent copies of relevant application forms for their studies, travel documents, housing, etc. Information on their programme of study, general background information on NUS, Singapore, and campus life, as well as travel information, are also provided.

To facilitate foreign students' gathering of information about NUS and FBA, the relevant application forms and information are also available via the Faculty's SEP website. The website serves as a one-stop information site containing data and links to course offerings, module outlines, academic calendar, and other information critical to their stay at the Faculty. The FBA also runs an 'Airport Pickup Service' for foreign students. Student representatives from the External Relations Committee of the BIZAD Club assist the Faculty in receiving foreign students who have requested to be met on arrival.

Upon arrival, an orientation programme is usually conducted for these students before the commencement of the semester. This programme focuses on introducing the campus and academic facilities, the programme of study, the basics of campus living, and the social side of campus life. At the FBA, the non-academic part of the orientation is organised and conducted by local FBA students.

Each foreign student is also assigned a 'buddy' who is a local FBA student who has participated in the SEP to the foreign student's university or country. This buddy is required to set up initial contact with his/her assigned foreign student(s) by sending an introductory email to them before their arrival in Singapore. This will help to mitigate some of the possible anxiety the foreign student may have prior to arrival, and will also serve as a contact point from which he/she can solicit information from, especially regarding the social aspects of settling into Singapore. Buddies are requested to be present at the orientation briefing to meet up with their assigned foreign students to facilitate further communication and socialising.

Foreign students are not forgotten after the orientation period is over. Additional contacts with foreign stu-

dents are maintained via a specially designated notice board and irregular informal gatherings, as well as through appointments with the FBA Exchange Coordinator and Exchange Administrator who are assigned to look after the foreign students. Thus throughout the semester, the FBA Exchange Office is always on hand to assist foreign students with curricular or administrative matters.

At the end of each semester, a Farewell-cum-Feedback tea session is normally held to allow foreign students a last chance to get together as a group and also to get any outstanding issues clarified. Feedback is also solicited to assist the FBA Exchange Office in refining operating procedures and practices.

Ensuring a Successful Exchange

The key concern of the FBA's Exchange Office is that students, both local and foreign, must be able to gain from and enjoy the exchange experience. At the FBA, we try our best to help foreign students benefit from and value their SEP experience as much as possible, so that they will return home and speak well of the FBA and NUS. This will in turn open more doors for our local students to go overseas for exchange, arriving at a win-win situation. ■

Managing Foreign Students: The Science Approach

Associate Professor Ang Siau Gek

Sub-Dean, Faculty of Science

The Faculty of Science has an extensive outreach programme to promote our courses through local and overseas promotional talks in our endeavour to bring in good quality students, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Over the last four years, we have seen the fruits of these efforts in the steady increase in the intake of foreign undergraduate students as shown below:

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Total Undergraduate Intake	922	939	1,095	1,224
No. of Foreign Undergraduates	81	117	217	241

Malaysians form the bulk of the foreign student population in the Faculty. Besides Malaysia and countries like India, China, and Indonesia, the Science Faculty has also witnessed an expansion in the diversity of the countries of origin of foreign students to non-traditional sources like the Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Mauritius. With the increase in the number of students coming from different cultural and economic backgrounds, we have encountered unusual situations that have required us to adapt how we manage foreign students as the expectations of these students can be quite different.

Studying in a foreign country can be a difficult experience for some students. For instance, problems can arise due to cultural differences. In order to help foreign students make the transition into life at NUS as smoothly as possible, the Science Faculty has a mentor system, where all undergraduates are assigned academic mentors in the major subject areas. Wherever possible, we have tried to assign mentors who are either from the students' country of origin or a nearby country. However, this may not always be possible as the Faculty has a limited number of staff members (or none at all) from certain countries.

Apart from learning to live in a different cultural environment, foreign students have to confront homesickness and loneliness, being away from family and friends. Consequently, the Faculty has implemented a buddy system in which senior Science students from the same countries of origin are encouraged to make early contact with their freshmen counterparts. The Faculty has also been instrumental in persuading the hostels to house our foreign students on campus in order that they benefit from close interaction with their peers.

The Science Faculty feels very strongly that foreign students should be given as much assistance as is given to

local students, if not more, to enable them to perform to the best of their abilities. A particularly serious problem faced by some foreign students coming from non-traditional sources involves linguistic difficulties. For these students, coming to NUS means having to switch to learning in a language normally used minimally at home, perhaps only in a foreign language course. In the Faculty, we have made special efforts to help such students by assigning, in some cases, graduate student mentors who will help them to adjust to speaking and learning in the English language. We have been very heartened by the results of some of these students who have justified themselves as worthy of the efforts that we have put in for them.

In addition, the Faculty has also been helping those coming from less privileged backgrounds to make up for any shortcomings in their previous educational experience. For instance, we conduct computer software courses during semester vacations, giving priority to foreign students who sign up.

For some students, coming to Singapore is their first experience away from home and some have been distracted by what Singapore has to offer outside of campus. The strict rules imposed by the Faculty on class attendance has helped us to ensure that students, both local and foreign, attain a certain level of competence in their subjects in order to take examinations at the end of the semester. However, discipline in work is still very much the responsibility of the individual student, and there is a limit to what the Faculty can do. Unfortunately, there have been instances whereby concerned parents (both local and foreign) have been unduly demanding in their expectations of what Faculty members should be accountable for in this respect.

Thus far, we have spared no effort to enrich the educational experience of our foreign students both culturally and academically, including providing a handbook (also available at <http://www.science.nus.edu.sg/students/ISG>) that contains information regarding important aspects of on- and off-campus life to help foreign students settle down in Singapore. In the future, we hope to continue improving our capabilities and make the period during which our foreign students study at the Faculty of Science even more fulfilling. ■

The Challenges of Studying at NUS: A MAURITIAN Student's Perspective

Ms Nusrat Mukadam

Year III Student, School of Computing

Deciding to pursue my studies in NUS was an enormous challenge. Back home in Mauritius, NUS is considered to be one of the toughest universities to enter as only the best and most hardworking students are admitted. When I attended the NUS briefing that was advertised in the local newspaper, at first it was like any other university promotional talk. But I emerged from the briefing that day fascinated by the accommodation, loans, and grants NUS was offering as well as the description of life at NUS. This very rare proposal by a university to supply study loans and enable students to get internationally recognised degrees was an opportunity I could not miss. So I began the process of applying to NUS and trying to find as much information as I could about Singapore. The more research I did, the more I was encouraged to come to Singapore as everyone kept saying that the country was a very safe place (i.e. no wars or riots, nice and well-disciplined, etc.).

To my great astonishment, I received an acceptance letter a few months later, and so began a long journey to an unknown country. Unfortunately, my first impressions of Singapore were not positive. When the plane landed at Changi, it was raining very heavily, and I thought: "What a gloomy country!" As I did not know how to get to NUS, I took a taxi to Kent Ridge. Upon reaching NUS, I tried to find out about admission and accommodation procedures. People were helpful in giving me directions to the Administration Building. Nevertheless, I got lost and spent hours searching for the right place. When at last I reached Administration, the office seemed very chaotic, and I had to wait a long time before I was told I had to go through matriculation (until then, I did not even know what matriculation was) and to open a bank account, amidst other things. My next stop was the Office of Student Affairs, where to my great relief, I finally found out about my lodgings for the academic year.

When I reached my hall of residence, everything there was alien to me. Everyone was rushing around and going about orientation, etc. But being a very open-minded person, I knew that nothing was going to be easy in a new country and I wanted to make my stay in Singapore a fruitful one. I either had to get involved in the life here, or isolate myself and suffer. So I decided to participate, mix around, and get to know people.

The hall orientation programme helped a lot by making me feel that I was not the only foreign student here and that there were others who were undergoing the same things as I was. My first friend was a girl from China. Although we had a language problem, we managed to get along very well and I felt better and better as the days went by.

But the overall atmosphere at NUS was not what I had initially expected: foreigners like me were left out most of the time and it was very hard for me to discover why this was happening. Local students just did not seem to want to mingle with us. For instance, there were language

difficulties. So many people kept speaking a dialect that we foreigners could not understand. As hall residents come from all over the world and each person has a different accent, it was hard trying to figure out what others were saying.

Moreover, the hall culture did not seem encouraging to foreigners: no one wanted to entrust us foreigners with responsibilities for any of the organised activities. Although I hate to say it, I felt then that no matter what a foreigner said or did, local students considered themselves as superior. And as more and more foreign students felt left out, there was a natural tendency to band together with others in the same situation.

Despite these trends, I was determined not to give up trying to integrate into hall life. To prove to other hall residents that I was capable of accomplishing as much as they could, I volunteered myself for various positions when selections for hall committees began. I got accepted in various committees and tried my very best to carry out the responsibilities that I was given. It was only after the first semester that people around me realised: "Hey, this is someone who can do things." Then they started to wave to

me at breakfast, dinner, or whenever they saw me in the corridor. It was wonderful to finally make so many new friends, and most important, to have them accept me in their circle of friends.

Besides getting accustomed to living in the halls, there was, in addition, faculty life to deal with. The Singapore education system is very different from what I was used to. Not only is the pace of life here amazingly fast, I also had to contend with lectures, tutorials, labs, recitations, and extracurricular activities. Again, I faced communication difficulties trying to understand the different accents of teaching staff and fellow students. Most of the time, the courses sounded like Greek to me.

Although I have been very stressed trying to adapt to new norms and cope with so many things, I must admit that I have never regretted coming to NUS. In my stay here, I have grown much as a person, having learnt many things, taken up activities, and watched others doing things I would not have otherwise encountered, as well as made many new friends. Life at NUS may be very hectic for a foreign student; but when one learns how to cope, one can only emerge as a winner! ■

The English Language & the NUS Foreign Student

Dr Laina Ho

Centre for English Language Communication

*"In language, the ignorant have prescribed laws to the learned."
(Richard Duppa, 1606-1679)*

What do these words mean to you: *edit*, *published*, *compassionate*, *deferred*? These are simple words, as they are common academic vocabulary. And yet, it is amazing how foreign students¹ in NUS can give them new meanings and interpretations, resulting in misunderstanding, mortification, and misery. Teaching English and getting learners to achieve some competence is by no means an easy feat. But it looks as if understanding how adult foreign learners can misconstrue the English language now requires mental gymnastics by the NUS English tutor.

As an English tutor, I have encountered many situations—sometimes trying, sometimes entertaining—in my dealing with foreign students, not in the classroom, but in my administrative work with them because of their language difficulties. Take the words, *edit* and *published*. I

require students to submit unedited, unpublished research papers for the writing module in my English course. For many foreign students, *edit* means texts that have been corrected by the editor of journals or periodicals; therefore, their research papers that have been read by their supervisors, or by their colleagues, friends, and relatives, are in their minds, not edited. Similarly, *published* is considered to be published in journals and books, and not in their Master's dissertations. Consequently, when they misinterpret the meaning of these two words, they have unintentionally broken rules. And when rules are broken, students suffer repercussions and mortification.

Now I explain *edit* as 'not read and corrected by anyone', and *published* as 'published in any journals, bulletin news, departmental circulars, reports, thesis proposals, or dissertations'. Nevertheless, English words still continue to have multiple meanings for foreign students, sometimes leading to confusion and unhappiness.

1. By foreign students, I will assume any student who is from a non-English speaking educational background.



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These include teaching and learning support, research on educational development issues, as well as instructional design and development.

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A more recent example is *deferred*, meaning delayed or postponed. Clear and simple though this word may be, when we tutors use the word in the context of assessment feedback, foreign students construe it as: "Delayed? Postponed? There must be something wrong with me and my English that I'm not allowed to join my pals?" Far too often and too hastily, foreign students can jump to the wrong conclusion thinking that English tutors are using some kind of subtle ploy to discriminate them.

Consequently, we have now learned never to assume that simple English vocabulary is self-explanatory. We have also learned that such problems are not necessarily due to cultural differences or perverse personalities, but probably the result of 'convoluted' meanings that the English language has for foreign students. So now in the English test we conduct to diagnose their English proficiency, we insert a footnote on the results list, explaining that deferred students are required to do the English course in the following semester because, though they are good at oral, they are weak in writing and need to do a special writing course.

Interacting with foreign students is not all gloom and doom. It has its fun moments too. Take the words, *compassionate leave*. We usually assume that this refers to leave associated with suffering, mainly emotional. So what do you do when a graduate student says to you that he was absent for his tutorials because he was away on compassionate leave, but here he is, looking as pleased as punch, and as far as I can see, not suffering from any mental anguish or physical ailment? The reason why he was absent, this student said, was that he had to be in the hospital that day because his wife was giving birth to his son! His reasoning was though he was not physically incapacitated, he was anxious for his wife in case there was an emergency. Therefore, anxiety constituted a kind of suffering and merited compassionate leave! I did not know whether to congratulate him or to tick him off. Later I checked the university rules for student attendance and found that there was no provision for paternity leave for students. But I let him off.

It is apparent that in managing foreign students, the English tutor has to adopt a new mindset (i.e. he/she has to simplify the English language in such a way that beginning learners of English can understand). Thus in using language in official and administrative matters, we should include footnotes, explanations, and so on to make the message as clear as possible. This may look puerile, but we would rather do this than to cause foreign students to misunderstand important instructions. Truly, these students have prescribed for us the message that communicating in the English language with foreign learners is never as simple as it seems, even for experts. ■

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