

More NTU exchange students opt for European languages

Rising number from Western countries opting for those over local languages

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Fuelled by interest or simply a desire to experience South-east Asia, exchange students are coming to Singapore – and picking up European languages like German and Spanish in their time here.

And a small but growing number of them are European, American and Canadian students.

Ms Fionnuala Joseph, 20, an exchange student from Britain who came to Nanyang Technological University (NTU) last August, is learning Russian at its Centre for Modern Languages. “I thought it would be a waste to go on exchange and not learn a language,” said the history student from the University of Warwick. “I thought of learning a language like Chinese but I felt that if I chose Russian, I could continue learning it back home, and it would be far more likely for me to go to Russia, whether for work or travel.”

She added that it was also an opportunity to take an academic risk that she cannot take at home as modules taken on exchange are given a pass or fail instead of a grade.

It is not usually compulsory for exchange students to take a foreign language module, but some take the opportunity to do so. Associate Professor Francesco Paolo Cavallaro, director of the NTU centre, said some European universities do not have language centres because they specialise in technical fields or business, for instance. “You might have to pay to learn a language in some universities in Europe, or language modules are only for students who are doing a degree in language.”

While most exchange students pick up local languages such as Chinese and Malay, he said, a growing number from Western countries have over the past few years opted for European languages. There are also those who want to continue learning certain languages that they started on back home so that they do not lose touch with them, he added.

Last year, the centre’s German and French classes had 18 and 29 such students, respectively, up from 10 to 15 each a few years ago.

The Spanish class has 19 of them this semester, compared with five last semester; while six are taking



Czech Republic exchange students Martin Kucera and Martina Voskova (centre), 26, take German classes at NTU’s Centre for Modern Languages, while Ms Fionnuala Joseph from Britain studies Russian. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

Russian classes, compared with two in the previous semester.

The centre offers seven European languages – Italian, French, German, Russian, Latin, Swedish and Spanish – out of a total of 16.

Mr Martin Kucera, 21, from Czech Technical University in Prague, decided to take German at an intermediate level when he started his exchange programme last month.

The computer science student, who learnt German in high school and in his home university, said: “I want to improve my German and



CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

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MS PATRICIA LORENZ (above), German language coordinator at NTU’s Centre for Modern Languages.

keep in touch with it... between all the breaks, I can understand the basics but I’m not fluent in it.”

He is now also learning beginner-level Chinese, which he describes as “a lot harder”. He said: “It makes sense to learn an Asian language while in Asia, and Mandarin is spoken by many people.”

Prof Cavallaro said language modules are growing in popularity. Last year, almost 7,000 students took up such classes, which have waiting lists, compared with 5,500 in 2014.

The languages are mostly taught by native speakers and classes are held twice a week. Students interested in taking up languages have to do a placement test to determine their proficiency level before they are sorted into the appropriate class. Depending on the requirements of their home universities, exchange students get a grade for the module or receive a pass or fail.

Ms Patricia Lorenz, the centre’s German language coordinator, said: “Students realise that if they want to work in Europe, knowing the languages opens up career opportunities. German is attractive because it is linked to big industries like technology and automotive companies.

“We live in a globalised world. It’s a major advantage to speak a foreign language. It helps you fit in with a culture or company more, because you speak their language.”

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