Local universities to help govt assess risks

Younger generation to learn strategic anticipation

SINGAPORE’S three local universities have been roped in to help the country strengthen its ability to assess risks and anticipate events.

The outreach effort has already resulted in valuable feedback from students and academics on how the government can improve Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS), Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security S Jayakumar said yesterday.

Speaking at the start of a two-day international symposium, he said that the government wants to “expose the younger generation to the importance of strategic anticipation and planning”.

Since last year, students at the Singapore Management University (SMU) have used the programme to analyse the supply chain for agricultural commodities. The National University of Singapore (NUS) has used it to study the Asian financial crisis. And Nanyang Technological University (NTU) is looking at possible scenarios relating to China, global food and multilateral security issues.

The government has learnt much in the past three years since it established RAHS, Prof Jayakumar said. “[It] is a natural part of a networked government, offering a whole-of-government approach to detecting and identifying early indicators of strategic issues, both threats as well as opportunities.”

He cited examples such as the Asian financial crisis, severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US that “surprised” the world when they occurred. More recently, uncertainty has seeped in, thanks to fear of global warming, food shortages and a collapse of financial institutions.

“These issues offer us only a glimpse of the complexity and uncertainty the future has in store,” Prof Jayakumar said. “It is important to have a coherent and systematic framework to anticipate and manage potential changes. However, it is not possible for us to have a crystal ball through which we can see the future, nor can we predict what strategic surprises lie ahead.”

What the government can do, he said, is to “encourage a coordinated analysis of trends, weak signals and wild cards”.

At a dinner last night for the symposium participants, Head of Civil Service Peter Ho said that while uncertainty and unpredictability “produce enormous challenges for governments, societies and nations”, opportunities also abound.

“The key is how to identify black swans and wild cards, and then how to deal with their consequences, the wicked problems,” he said. “We will use RAHS to help manage complexity and disruptive change.”

Diversity is vital in these efforts to reach out to a wider community as possible, Mr Ho said.

“We should look at the potential value of establishing links to domain experts in academia, private sector and industry, and with our friends from abroad.”

This year’s RAHS symposium, the second, is being attended by 300 security experts, academics, technologists and futurists from 25 countries.