3 of 4 S’pore universities to be led by foreigners

This reflects schools’ aim to import best practices from overseas, say observers

BY LEOW SI WAN

WITH the appointment of Swedish professor Bertil Andersson as the next president of Nanyang Technological University (NTU), three out of the four heads of universities in Singapore will be foreigners.

Observers see this as a reflection of how keen the universities are to import best practices from overseas. But some also wonder what it says about the lack of home-grown leadership talent in tertiary institutions.

When Dr Su Guaning steps down as NTU’s president next June, only the National University of Singapore (NUS) will be headed by a Singaporean – Professor Tan Chorh Chuan.

Professor Arnold De Meyer, 55, a Belgian, now heads the Singapore Management University (SMU), while Professor Thomas Magnanti, 65, an American, is the founding president of the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), which will open in April 2012.

Industry players and academics note that several of the top research institutions and think tanks here are also headed by foreign-born talent, who also make up a fair proportion of academic staff in all the institutions.

The role of a university’s president has grown over the years. Mrs Josephine Teo, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, said heading a university now requires a range of talents. “The person must have a high academic standing to gain the respect of the faculty. He must also be a strong administrator to put in place systems and processes, and must have the leadership, charisma to inspire the student body,” she said.

Of Prof Andersson’s appointment, she said: “We should look at this positively. It is great news that we can attract all these top talents to head our schools. If we are settling for second-best foreigners because there aren’t enough Singaporeans, I would be worried, but this isn’t the case.”

The consensus seems to be that given the complexity of the job, the best man should be chosen, regardless of nationality.

Dr Chng Kor Kian, chief executive of TMC Academy, one of the more established private schools here, said a foreign-born leader who is highly qualified and with a good reputation will go a long way in helping a university establish links with foreign institutions. “Such foreign presidents can suggest new educational systems,” he added.

Prof Magnanti, for example, was dean of the School of Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), now one of the two key partner institutions (the other is China’s Zhejiang University) of SUTD.

As to whether Singaporeans should worry about the lack of home-grown leadership talent, Mrs Teo noted that both NUS and NTU have had Singaporeans at the helm.

Besides, hiring foreign talent is not peculiar to Singapore. “It is the same overseas,” she said, citing the example of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, whose president, Professor Shih Choon Fong, previously headed NUS.

Dr Chng added that academics like Prof Anderson would allow Singapore to marry the system here with the best from overseas.

Mr Lee Kwek Cheong, chief executive of the Singapore Institute of Management, said universities – like companies – should look at both internal and external candidates. Prof Andersson is currently provost of NTU.

Still, some voiced concerns about whether a non-Singaporean can understand the culture of the country, let alone its complicated education policy.

Dr R. Thavendra, secretary-general of the Management Development Institute of Singapore, felt this was an important consideration for a university like NTU, which began as a Chinese university.

Dr Tan Chee Lay, deputy executive director of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, said: “The new president of NTU – just like any other president of any university – would definitely have to be sensitive to and aware of the history and culture of NTU.”

Additional reporting by Jana Ng

Prof Andersson will be NTU’s new president. PHOTO: NTU

Varsity heads – past and present

| National University of Singapore: The 105-year-old institution has had 20 vice-chancellors and presidents, both Singaporeans and foreigners. The current president, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, has been serving from 2008 and is a Singaporean. His predecessors were also Singaporeans: Professor Shih Choon Fong, who held the fort from 2000 to 2008, and Professor Lim Pin, from 1981 to 2000. |
| Nanyang Technological University: The two other presidents before Swedish Professor Bertil Andersson were Singaporeans: Dr Su Guaning has been serving as president from 2002 and will step down next year. NTU’s first president, Professor Chiam Tao Soon, headed the university for 22 years. |
| Singapore Management University (SMU): Its current president, Professor Arnold De Meyer, is a Belgian. He succeeded Prof. Howard Hunter, an American who stepped down two months ago. The 10-year-old varsity’s first two presidents were also Americans: Professor Janice Bellace from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, and Professor Ronald Frank from Emory University. |
| Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD): Set to open in 2012, Singapore’s fourth university has appointed Professor Thomas Magnanti, an American, as its head. |