Higher education here ‘ahead of the curve’

S’pore now pioneering new models: Panel

BY SANDRA DAVIE
SENIOR WRITER

THE higher-education system here has been praised as one that is no longer playing catch-up with the West, but is instead striking out in a truly distinctive direction.

An international panel that draws its 13 members from distinguished universities across the world concluded its five-day meeting here with the observation that Singapore started by adapting established educational models for its own needs, but has graduated to pioneering new, noteworthy ones.

Examples of these cited by the International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP) are:
- The Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), a university that will marry engineering, architecture and design training;
- The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), set up for polytechnic upgraders;
- The National University of Singapore-Yale liberal arts college; and
- The medical school set up by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in partnership with Imperial College London, where medicine will be intertwined with engineering.

In the words of IAAP chairman Tony Tan, Singapore’s tertiary education has “reached a watershed” and “is now moving ahead of the curve”.

Professor Robert Brown, who is president of Boston University and who has sat on the IAAP since its inception in 1997, added: “Singapore is not playing catch-up any more. It’s doing new things.”

The panel noted that when the new institutions are up and running by 2015, the percentage of each Primary 1 cohort making it to university will jump from the current one in four (25 per cent) to nearly one in three (30 per cent).

It said: “The new institutions, together with the established universities, will add educational pathways for Singaporeans and produce high-quality manpower to support Singapore’s future economic and social needs.”

Several panel members singled out SIT’s model of partnering with reputed overseas universities to provide niche degree courses for polytechnic graduates in areas ranging from the culinary arts to video games development. SIT not only provides an additional degree pathway for polytechnic graduates, but will also produce highly desired graduates for Singapore’s growth sectors, it noted.

Turning to the three established universities, the National University of Singapore (NUS), NTU and the Singapore Management University, the panel noted their “remarkable progress” in becoming world-class, research-intensive institutions.

It added: “Individually, each university has succeeded in bringing talent into the system – be it students or faculty, both local and international. They have generated intellectual and social capital which has contributed to the vibrancy of Singapore.”

The panel recommended, however, that as the higher-education landscape here becomes more variegated, all institutions, new and existing, should look into collaborating, especially in research. This will create synergies in the development of research capabilities and enhance Singapore’s overall competitive advantage in attracting top research talent.

Panel member Alison Richard, the former vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, saying she was impressed with how the system has grown in breadth and at such speed, added: “There’s a growing sense of confidence that’s entirely warranted but, I must add, with zero complacency and a constant look at the future.”

The IAAP, which convened biennially, was set up in 1997 by the Ministry of Education to advise Singapore’s universities on major trends and directions in university education and research. Its scope has since broadened to include the development of Singapore’s tertiary sector as a whole.

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Others can learn from SIT model, says panel

BY JANE NG

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), which provides polytechnic graduates with one more route to a university degree, can be a model other countries can replicate, said a high-powered panel of academics advising the Government on tertiary education here.

The International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP) praised the institute for preserving the strong foundations of Singapore's polytechnic system while building on the university landscape.

The SIT, set up last year to provide niche degree courses through tie-ups with reputable overseas institutions, distinguishes itself from other tertiary institutions in one way: It also welcomes polytechnic diploma holders who have started working but wish to earn their degree.

This injects an element of flexibility into the education system, said Professor Paul Romer, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Institute for Economic Policy Research and a member of IAAP.

He said: "Part of what SIT does is introduce that alternation between full-time work and full-time study that hasn't been present here in the system. It's a very important opening up of the flexibility of the education system."

He added that SIT also gives students the option of changing careers by pursuing a course in a field different from their diploma.

"It gives people the courage to take more risks and that, with the alternation between work and learning, is very important in the evolution of the education system here," he said.

The IAAP was set up in 1997 by the Education Ministry to advise Singapore's universities on major trends in university education. Its scope has since been broadened to include providing guidance on the tertiary sector.

Yesterday, the panel also cited the other pioneering education models here which impressed them:

- Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD): Its inter-disciplinary learning model incorporating design and other fields is a world first, the panel noted. SUTD's ability to innovate from a clean slate will be instrumental to its success.

- Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) new medical school: The panel noted that NTU's tie-up with Imperial College London will infuse engineering elements into medical education and help meet the growing demand for doctors here.

The panel suggested the medical school work closely with existing medical schools and hospitals to optimize the use of clinical training facilities.

- Progress of the three universities: The panel noted that since its last meeting in 2008, the National University of Singapore, NTU and the Singapore Management University have made remarkable progress in becoming research-intensive universities, without neglecting their key mission of providing a strong foundation in undergraduate education by being centred on the student.

Panel members

- Mr Dick Jan van den Berg, president, Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands
- Professor Sanjay Dhande, director, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur
- Professor Mark Wrighton, chancellor, Washington University in St Louis.
- Dr Tony Tan, chairman, National Research Foundation and Singapore Press Holdings
- Mr G. Leonard Baker Jr, managing director, Sutter Hill Ventures
- Dr Robert A. Brown, president, Boston University
- Professor Gu Binglin, president, Tsinghua University
- Dr Hiroshi Komiyama, former president, University of Tokyo
- Dr Kari Olavi Raitio, former chancellor, University of Helsinki
- Professor Rafael Reif, provost, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Professor Alison Richard, former vice-chancellor, Cambridge University
- Professor Paul Romer, senior fellow, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, Stanford University
- Dr Henry T. Yang, chancellor, University of California, Santa Barbara