国际学术咨询团会议

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Singapore’s higher education system will become a model for the region

International Academic Advisory Panel Meeting

The International Academic Advisory Panel believes that the development of Singapore’s higher education system has reached a watershed. When the new institutions and programmes are fully implemented, Singapore will become a model for new education approaches for the region and even for the world.

The International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP) commends Singapore’s higher education system for having achieved breakthrough improvements in recent years and notes that its development has reached a watershed. When the new institutions and programmes are fully implemented, Singapore will be a model for new educational approaches in the region and even for the world.

The panel said that Singapore has done well in leveraging on its network of international partners and learning from more developed countries. This strategy has worked well for Singapore. Today, our higher education system is increasingly innovative and moving ahead of the curve, and we are no longer playing catch-up. The new institutions that will be or have just been set up attest to this fact.

At the same time, these new changes would also facilitate the achievement of the Government’s goal of increasing in university cohort participation rate from the current 26% to 30% by 2015.

Over the past five days, a panel of 11 international experts in education led by National Research Foundation (NRF) Chairman Dr Tony Tan had convened the 8th IAAP meeting. The panel concluded the meeting with a press conference yesterday afternoon.

Summarising the panel’s observations, Dr Tan, who is also the Chairman of the Singapore Press Holdings, summarised the panel’s observations, said, “When these new institutions and programmes are implemented, Singapore will become a venue to showcase new educational models to the region and even the world.”

The IAAP was established in 1997 by MOE to advise the two Singapore universities then – NUS and NTU - with a view to developing them into world-class universities. Their role had since expanded. Besides advising on major trends and directions in university education, the IAAP provide guidance on attracting talents and developing Singapore as an educational hub. The theme of this year’s IAAP meeting is “Transforming University Education for the New Economy”.

Four Conclusions

In line with the theme, the panel arrived at four main conclusions. Firstly, the panel was impressed with the greater diversity in Singapore’s higher education landscape. The Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), which incorporates design, engineering and research in its curriculum, is very unique. The IAAP noted that while such an educational approach is potentially powerful, SUTD will need to be bold and innovative in order for it to become a reference model. On the other hand, the Imperial College London – Nanyang Technological University Medical School is a timely addition. The IAAP suggests closer coordination with the existing medical schools, and across the healthcare system to optimise the use of clinical training facilities.

The panel strongly endorses the proposal for NUS and Yale University to establish a liberal arts college in Singapore. The IAAP forst mooted the idea in 2007 as a strategy for Singapore to attract and retain top talent. The collaboration between NUS and Yale will complement the other local tertiary institutions and nurture high quality graduates.

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) also received praise from several international experts. The panel said that the SIT is an effective bridge connecting polytechnic and university education, and it can become a model for other countries to learn from. Professor Paul Romer from Stanford University pointed out that many students typically work for a few years after completing their tertiary education, before going back to the books again. SIT will provide students with more choices and inject an element of flexibility into the education system. At the same time, an institution such as SIT also heralds good news for workers who intend to make a career change.

Achievements of the three universities recognised

The panel endorses the achievements and progress of the three local universities. They note that the three universities have made remarkable progress in becoming world-class research-intensive universities, without neglecting their key mission of educating students. In addition, the panel also endorses the Government's approach of continually investing in research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

They said that the Government's $2 billion Singapore Universities Trust will not only create more funding for universities but also encourages alumni and the community at large to donate more actively to institutions.

The 8th IAAP panel comprises 12 scholars and experts from America, Europe and Asia. Professor Mark Wrighton from Washington University in St. Louis was the only member who could not attend this meeting.

Commenting on the future challenges of the panel, Mr Dirk Jan van den Berg, President of Delft University of Technology in Holland and a first-time panel member, said," Going forward, we need to explore how to assess the progress of these new universities. This does not only apply to Singapore but it is the key global trend. The task of the panel will now be to look at how to define a top international university as we now integrate the perspectives of America, Europe and Asia."
Details on the plans for liberal arts college to be announced at the end of the year

NUS and Yale University are on track with their discussion on the setting up of a Liberal Arts College. NUS expects details to be announced end of this year, at the earliest.

Professor Lily Kong, NUS Vice President (University and Global Relations), told the media at the IAAP press conference yesterday.

Prof Kong, who is a member of the steering committee for the Yale-NUS College, said, "We are very happy with the progress of the discussions and everything is on schedule. We expect to be able to conclude our talks and share our future plans with everyone by early next year or even earlier, by the end of this year."

The presidents of all four local universities were invited to attend the IAAP press conference but NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan and NTU President Professor Su Guaning were absent due to overseas commitments. NUS was represented by Professor Barry Halliwell, Deputy President (Research and Technology), as well as Prof Kong. NTU was represented by President-Designate Professor Bertil Andersson.

Prof Kong highlighted that the panel has thrown its support behind the Yale-NUS collaboration and this was very encouraging for NUS. She said: "I think the panel recognises that the setting up of a liberal arts college will add diversity to the local higher education landscape. This has strategic significance for Singapore."

The idea of establishing a liberal arts college in Singapore was first mooted by the IAAP in 2007, and concrete progress was made in September this year.

When asked if the long delay was disappointing, panel chairman Dr Tony Tan said, "I have always been convinced that we cannot be too hasty when implementing new educational measures, especially important programmes. The joint college between NUS and Yale is a new education model and there will be some unforeseeable problems at the beginning. NUS and MOE had made a decision only careful consideration and I feel that this is the right thing to do. I am confident that this college will work, and that it will significantly add to the diversity of the local tertiary education. It is better to make slow progress rather than rush through things."

SIT can be a model for the region

As polytechnics constitute an important part in Asia's education system, the establishment of the SIT will play a major role in influencing and serving as a model for the region.

The IAAP commends the establishment of SIT, which preserves the strong foundations of Singapore's polytechnic system while situating it more closely alongside Singapore's university landscape.
The IAAP said that the establishment of SIT can provide an additional option for local polytechnic students seeking a university education and also help produce graduates needed for Singapore’s growth sectors. This is an innovative approach which can be a model for other countries.

Professor Sanjay Dhande, Director of the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur and one of the IAAP panelists, openly praised the setting up of SIT at the press conference. He added, however, that the existing programmes in the polytechnics need to be reviewed to narrow the knowledge gap of polytechnic students enrolling in universities.

He said, "In India and other countries, the problem faced by thousands of polytechnics is ensuring employment for their graduates. If the SIT model is successful, this can be replicated across many countries and will lead to a major transformation in countries such as India."

He feels that a challenge that SIT will face is to make sure that its graduates are of the same standards as graduates of other universities and the degree that it confers should not be a second-class degree.

When asked if there are other goals apart from increasing Singapore’s university cohort participation rate from the current 26 percent to 30 percent by 2015, NRF Chairman and SPH Chairman Dr Tony Tan reiterated the importance of polytechnics in the local education landscape.

He said that instead of focusing on the percentage of each cohort making it to university, the focus should be on the percentage of each cohort receiving tertiary education. Overall, by 2015, more than 70 percent of each student cohort will be receiving some form of tertiary education.

Dr Tan also pointed out that many countries are facing a major problem of making higher education on par with university education. This can lead to many problems such as an excessive number of university graduates. Singapore’s system encompasses universities, polytechnics and the Singapore Institute of Technology. He said that this is a more sustainable system which is more suited for Singapore, and it can serve as a model for other countries.