A forward-looking university sector

This is an edited extract from a speech by Education Minister Ng Eng Hen in Parliament yesterday when he moved the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) Bill

SINGAPORE’S university sector has evolved considerably since its inception as a small medical college in 1905. In 1980, the percentage of a cohort that made it to university was only 8 per cent. We reached 26 per cent in 2010 and are on track to meet our target of 30 per cent by 2015.

But it would be a mistake to focus just on expanding the number of places in developing the university sector. China recently announced its goal to have eight million graduates a year by 2020. India has committed to six million graduates a year by 2020. We cannot compete on numbers. Instead, we must differentiate ourselves by attaining the highest quality of tertiary education in Singapore. We must be bold and open to new models of tertiary education that will become more relevant as the future unfolds.

We need to do this for our students to acquire a competitive edge in education against other graduates. Our university sector is not guided by increasing the number of places, but by the drive to raise quality and spur innovation. This approach has led to the creation of the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), the Singapore Institute of Technology, the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, the new degree programmes at Nafa and LaSalle, and the Yale-National University of Singapore College.

The Singapore Institute of Technology model preserves and leverages on the strength of our polytechnic sector, while providing polytechnic students with an option to obtain a university degree from well-regarded foreign universities. This approach has many advantages, not least the focus on producing degree graduates who are attuned to the needs of industry and business.

The Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, a tie-up between Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Imperial College London (ICL), will not only produce more doctors to meet increasing health-care needs, but also facilitate innovations in the field of medicine. ICL was chosen because it will provide a different and complementary model to the existing Yong Loo Lin Medical School and Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School in medical education. Like NTU, ICL has strong engineering expertise and is a world leader in applying technology to the field of medicine.

The Yale-NUS College (YNC) will be another unique model that gives suitable students a different pathway to tertiary education. I have described it as “strategic for Singapore”. Indeed, it can prove to be, at various levels.

As the pinnacle programme at NUS, the YNC will have a pervasive and powerful effect on schools, especially at the pre-university level. It signals to students and parents that critical thinking, analysis and deliberation – hallmarks of liberal arts education – will be needed and valued in education.

Singaporeans and Asians are nothing if not pragmatists. If it doesn't count, it matters less. A liberal arts college will be a physical reminder that, as Einstein remarked: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

It will hopefully move us from a system that is now world-renowned for students who answer set questions well to one that produces students who want to start asking the right questions to produce solutions to complex problems. Our curricula in junior colleges and polytechnics have already started to change along these lines. The YNC will accelerate this.

Our economy is restructuring, and a stronger emphasis is placed on high productivity and high value-added industries. Our universities must complement this strategy by being engines of knowledge, innovation and enterprise.

The rise of China in this century will drastically reshape the global economic landscape. The United States economy, with its dynamism and constant capacity to reinvent itself, will continue to be a potent economic force, its present problems notwithstanding.

Singapore needs to ride the wave of growth in China and tap on good ideas from the US. With our cosmopolitan outlook and bilingual language and culture, we can function as a bridge between these two giant economies. This was the motivation behind the establishment of SUTD, in collaboration with two top universities in their respective countries, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from the US and Zhejiang University from China.

These new institutions added within the last two years position our higher education sector for the future. We will have a forward-looking higher education sector, not a backward-glancing one, which will prepare our students well for their future.

It offers an exciting and high-quality tertiary education for Singaporeans and international talent.