



Professor Robert Brown, president of Boston University, speaking during an IAAP press conference chaired by panel chairman Tony Tan yesterday. The panel praised the Republic's new educational institutions, with Prof Brown saying Singapore is "not playing catch-up any more" but "doing new things". ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

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 (26 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 convenes 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.

sandra@sph.com.sg
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