Higher education here ‘ahead of the curve’

Spore now pioneering new models: Panel

By Sandra Bayne
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 drew 23 members from distinguished universities across the world concluded its five-day meeting here with the observation that Singapore started by adapting established education models for its own needs, but has graduated to pioneering new, nine-zeros 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 graduates;
- The National University of Singapore’s 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 interwoven with engineering.

In the words of IAAP chairman Tony Tan, Singapore’s tertiary education has “achieved 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 anymore. It’s doing new things.”

The panel noted that while the new institutions are up and running by 2010, the percentage of each primary 1 cohort making it to universities will jump from the current one in four to six 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 NTU’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. NTU not only provides an additional degree pathway for polytechnic graduates, but also will produce highly skilled graduates for Singapore’s growth sectors, it noted.

Hailing 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 together the finest faculties, students and resources from 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 varied, 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 1999 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.