

Making uni education more rewarding

By **MALMINDERJIT SINGH**

[SINGAPORE] In just a few years, by 2020, almost half the student cohort in Singapore is expected to attend a government-subsidised degree programme. And businesses will be expected to play a greater role in moulding the graduates of the two most recently announced universities here.

The government's push to introduce an applied degree pathway here recently saw Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announce the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (UniSIM) as the latest publicly-funded universities here. With these changes, an estimated 10 per cent of the cohort will be pursuing a publicly-funded part-time degree, up from the estimated 7 per cent at present.

With publicly-funded full-time university places for Singaporeans to increase to 40 per cent by 2020, this would mean that 50 per cent of Singaporeans could receive a government-subsidised degree education in eight years' time.

The plans for an applied degree pathway will also feature more industry sponsorships for students and for work experience programmes to complement the academic curriculum.

SIT, which currently offers a number of programmes with a strong applied element in partnership with overseas universities, has already forged close links with industry. In 2011, there were 34 industry partners sponsoring scholarships for 12 per cent of its students in various disciplines.

To strengthen the industry component of its programmes, though, SIT will offer a Cooperative Education (Co-op) programme, which will integrate work

experience into the academic course requirements of its programmes.

This programme is different from an internship, explained SIT president-designate Tan Thiam Soon. "When the students get involved with the companies, they are not there just to do an internship only to get some exposure; they will actually be doing some real work. So we will work with the industries so that they (the participating students) will get real wages as well," Professor Tan said at a press briefing yesterday.

"They will be expected to work on real projects. This way, we leverage through the students the resources that SIT would want to build up. There are many meaningful ways we can forge that link with the companies."

He added that the form this Co-op programme will eventually take is still undecided as it could be a work-study model or one that alternates between the components of work and study. "At the end of the day, whatever the model, it will be something that will fit what companies in Singapore really need," Prof Tan said.

Education Minister Heng Swee Keat added that the key differentiating factor of the Co-op programme is that the work experience is an integral part and not just some add-on that other work experience programmes, such as internships, may have.

UniSIM, which will be Singapore's only private university, will also look towards harnessing industry partnerships to provide value to students applying to their programmes. The gov-

ernment will publicly fund full-time degree programmes in UniSIM to tap the private institution's track record in providing part-time degree programmes that have close linkages with industry, and which value and integrate the work experience of its students and the industry-current faculty, to provide a good balance of theoretical and real-world education.

This interaction with members of the industry will be critical for students coming into the full-time programme at UniSIM, explained president Cheong Hee Kiat. "Even the students who come to us (in the current part-time programmes) are from industry; and the teachers we use – a lot of them are also from industry."

Professor Cheong added that the university will look

into harnessing talent from industry to also conduct programmes for students and not rely purely on full-time academics to do so.

UniSIM's part-time students, most of whom are working adults, will also be its strength as they will be able to add to the diversity of the classroom. Full-time students will also benefit from the opportunity to take some courses together with their part-time counterparts.

Besides increasing financial support by extending government financial assistance schemes to students in part-time UniSIM Bachelor degree programmes, the government will also look to get businesses involved in making these programmes more affordable and, in the process, strengthen links with industry.

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