The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) will start a programme combining job-oriented units with academic courses in a small way, offering them to students on a select few courses.

But it hopes to grow into a distinctive "signature programme" of the university.

"We want to make it the programme that SIT will become known for, what students will pick us for. It will be one of the things that will differentiate us from the other universities," SIT's president-designate, Professor Ian Tan, told The Straits Times.

The details are still being worked out but the work-study programme is likely to be launched when SIT offers its own degree programmes in 2013.

In August, it was announced that SIT and SIM University will expand to offer more places to those who want a degree. UniSim will add full-time degree hosts part-time offerings and SIT, which runs niche degree programmes with overseas universities, will start offering its own degrees too.

This year, postdoctoral scholars make up more than 90 per cent of the SIT's intake of 1,100 students. The Education Ministry says the number of ME and UniSim will be more practice-oriented and closely linked to industry, both will offer programmes linking job attachments with study, called "cooperative education" in the United States.

Professor Tan said he and his senior colleagues had been overseas to study the cooperative education models at Duke of Northeastern universities in the US and Waterloo University in Canada. All have strong points and are successful in their own right, but SIT wants its own model to take work-study integration farther and benefit all graduates here.

In the US, the co-op programme has meant better job prospects for graduates, for example, more than a third of Duke graduates, who can clock as much as 18 months of work experience in a five-year degree course, land jobs with 80 per cent of their co-op employers even while studying.

Full work experience is valued and this is reflected in higher starting salaries than what fresh graduates from other universities command.

Professor Tan accepts that boosting job prospects is important, but he also wants to develop a unique co-op programme that nurtures what he calls the "SIT DNA" - want the SIT graduate to be adaptable - to be able to learn, unlearn and relearn," he said, borrowing from Ernesto Alonso's "machine that will not break down in 100 years".

"We are in the 21st century, where everything is changing. New skills and jobs will come and go. Singapore, being a small, open economy, will have to be nimble and keep adapting to these changes.

"So we have to think how we can best prepare our students for work that will change all the time."

He said the polytechnic graduates at SIT already have the basic tools to build the SIT DNA.

Employers have noted that those who take the polytechnic route tend to be hardworking and hungry for success, street-smart, resourceful and entrepreneurial.

Professor Tan said young people have to know that as Singapore produces more graduates, there will be different ways to work in the job market.

"It's already happening," he said, noting that employers already see a difference in graduates of the Singapore Management University, National University of Singapore, and Nanyang Technological University.

"Some prefer the graduates of one university, others the other and are willing to place them in higher positions and pay them more.

He hopes SIT graduates will stand out for being adaptable and flexible.

"When an employer announces that he wants to change course or relocate to another country, I hope it is the SIT graduate who will be the first to raise his hand," he said.

Sandra Davis
Senior Writer

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