Too fast a track to a degree?

The Singapore Institute of Technology, which offers polytechnic graduates a two-year track to a university degree, has big plans to expand. But it has to relook at its degree programmes to succeed.

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THE Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), slated to become the Republic’s first autonomous university, recently flushed out its expansion plans. The institute offers niche degree programmes with overseas universities. Most of its students are diploma holders from local polytechnics.

Besides doubling its current yearly intake to offer 3,500 places by 2020, it wants to launch its own degrees and joint-degree courses in the next few years. To gear up for its expansion, it has ramped up its hiring of faculty and is considering a bigger central campus.

It will also be launching a work-study scheme similar to the cooperative education programme provided in some American universities such as Drexel in Philadelphia.

In all, these are significant moves for the institute, which was set up in 2009 to offer degree opportunities for polytechnic graduates. In mere five years, the institute has become a popular choice for diploma holders.

Each year, several thousand vie for places in the two-year degree courses that it runs with reputed overseas institutions – ranging from an electrical engineering degree from the Technical University of Munich (TUM) to culinary arts from the Culinary Institute of America. This year’s enrollment was 1,500.

But the SIT is now at a critical juncture, with plans to become a full-fledged university and expand its student intake as well as its academic offerings.

The aim must be to build up distinctive, high-quality programmes that are different from the other local universities and which would give SIT graduates an edge in the job market.

The first thing it should relook is its two-year degree programmes.

These “fast-track” courses were welcomed by polytechnic graduates before the SIT was set up. Many headed to Australian and British universities to top up their diploma with a degree at two years. Some overseas universities even allowed them to complete their studies in 18 months.

SIT matched what overseas universities offered, and at a fraction of the fees that they charged.

Hence a diploma holder who would have spent about $100,000 for two years abroad, could complete a degree at the same speed from a well-regarded university through SIT for under $20,000.

Their fees are subsidised by the Government by about 70 per cent.

High attrition rate

But recently, three of SIT’s overseas partners have raised concerns over the compressed time for the degree courses.

The first was the DigiPen Institute of Technology, considered the Harvard for game developers and animators. It had compressed its four-year programme into two years when it tied up with SIT in 2010.

But the attrition rate was about 25 per cent. Students said it did not help that the demanding programme – which requires them to study high-level mathematics and physics – was compressed into two years. They could have spent another year – but would not be able to enjoy the subsidised fees any longer.

Next was the University of Nevada, Las Vegas which said last month that it was parting ways with SIT over a fee disagreement.

Some of its faculty members also raised concerns over its three-year hospitality management programme being run as a two-year course for SIT students.

More recently, the renowned TUM said it was also in talks with SIT to extend the 2½-year engineering course. Like DigiPen, it too is hoping to trim the high attrition rate of students in the course, which is as high as 20 per cent for the electrical engineering course. SIT said it was working with DigiPen and TUM officials to review the course structure and government subsidies.

Extend subsidies to three years

This is an opportune time for SIT and the Ministry of Education – which subsidises students’ fees to go back to the drawing board. They should consider extending the two-year programme to three years, and subsidising fees for that entire period.

Lengthening the course period will not just allow enough time for students to acquire the required content knowledge.

It will allow SIT the breathing space to do what all good universities should do: prepare its graduates with the soft skills needed for their chosen careers.

Currently, SIT offers limited workshops to build soft skills in its students, in areas such as networking and personal branding.

Having a year more will enable the institute to offer longer, more sustained courses in areas such as effective communication, cross-cultural understanding, marketing and entrepreneurship.

After all, employers increasingly demand well-rounded workers. Besides being able to do their job well, they want graduates who can communicate well with clients, market the services of the company, innovate and come up with spin-off business ideas.

Take the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) programme to nurture the entrepreneurial mindset of its students. It sends selected students on a year-long programme to its overseas colleges located in hubs such as Silicon Valley in California and Bic Valley in Philadelphia, where they take up business courses and work in start-ups.

SIT too has plans. By 2015, it aims to offer a cooperative education scheme, requiring students to alternate study semesters with work attachments. This will require students to extend their university period.

At Drexel University in Philadelphia, students combining their study semesters with work attachments take an extra year five years in all to graduate.

But the students gain in many ways.

More than a third of Drexel graduates, who can clock as much as 18 months of work experience in a five-year degree course, land jobs with the companies they did the internships with – while still studying.

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

SIT has said it hopes to grow its work-study programme into a distinctive “signature programme”.

SIT president Tan Thiam Soon had previously told the media that he aims for the programme to instil the SIT “DNA” in every student – to be adaptable and to be able to “learn, unlearn and relearn”.

Indeed in the Singapore context, flexibility and the ability to adapt will be crucial and this can become the “competitive advantage” of every SIT graduate.

This would build on the strengths of polytechnic-trained graduates. Employers have noted that those who take the polytechnic route tend to be hardworking and hungry for success, street-smart, resourceful and entrepreneurial.

SIT students need to stand out in the expanding graduate workforce as the job market becomes more differentiated.

Employers here already note the difference in graduates of the Singapore Management University, NUS and Nanyang Technological University.

Increasingly, local graduates will also have to compete against those from China, India and other developing countries, which are also ramping up their university places.

China alone is aiming to produce eight million graduates a year by 2020.

Singapore universities, including SIT, cannot compete in terms of quantity but they should go for quality – and nurture graduates with premium skills that something extra that will ensure good employment outcomes.

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