Singapore may rue fall in foreign student numbers

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R EMEMBER the days when Singapore was slated to be a Global Schoolhouse education hub, dubbed “Boston of the East”? Twelve years after the Economic Development Board unveiled its vision to bring top-notch foreign tertiary programmes to Singapore, the impetus has petered out.

In 2002, there were about 50,000 full-time foreign students in Singapore. About 36,000 of them were at local schools, the three public universities and tertiary institutions such as NUS and University of Chicago Booth in Singapore, and business schools with Singapore campuses. The rest were scattered over about 300 private institutions.

The target was to draw 150,000 foreign students by 2015. This was predicted to generate 22,000 jobs and boost the education sector’s gross domestic product contribution from 3 per cent then to 5 per cent.

Singapore, a safe, English-speaking environment with ready high education standards, wanted to lure Asian students to its brand-name universities. It can then grab a slice of the world education market estimated to be worth US$2.2 trillion.

Fast forward 12 years—and some of the brand-name schools have exited Singapore, foreign student numbers are down, and no one talks about being Boston of the East.

After the launch of the Global Schoolhouse plan, foreign student numbers did rise steadily to reach 97,000 at the end of 2008. But in 2009, the numbers started dipping—to 93,000, then 91,500 and 84,000 in 2012. Last month, The Straits Times reported that the number of foreign students was at about 75,000.

What happened? And is it a good thing for Singapore?

The slide that began in 2009 was due to the double whammy of the global financial crisis and scandals over dodgy private schools with poor quality standards. Things improved with tough new laws to raise standards.

But growing unease among Singaporeans over the influx of foreign students led to a cut in foreign student numbers. After the General Election in May 2011, the Government announced in August that the number of foreign students in universities would fall from 18 per cent at that time, to 15 per cent by 2015. Fees for foreign students went up. More places were created for Singaporean students.

The result is that foreign students now find it harder to land jobs after graduating, leaving many unable to fulfill the three-year bond on foreign students who pay subsidised tuition fees.

The rising cost of living is another key reason for the fall in foreign student numbers here.

A recent survey by HSBC ranks Singapore as the second most expensive place among 18 destinations for foreign undergraduates. A foreigner will spend an average of US$90,229 (S$114,000) a year studying here. In Australia, it’s US$42,093. In America and Britain, the third and fourth most expensive places, it’s US$36,564 and US$35,045.

Student recruiters in Singapore say rent and tuition fees have pummelled foreign students’ pockets most heavily.

Over the years, some brand-name institutions have also exited the scene, citing poor demand or funding problems. The biggest shock was when Australia’s University of New South Wales said in May 2007 that it was leaving, after just three months of classes.

In 2012, the Tisch School of the Arts Asia, the Singapore arm of the New York University film school, closed after five years in operation, citing funding problems. Last year, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business said it was pulling its prestigious executive education programme out of Singapore and setting up in Hong Kong to be closer to the booming Chinese economy.

To be sure, not all foreign tertiary institutions are scaling back. Insead has expanded its Ayer Rajah campus twice to increase enrolment. Essec Business School is developing its independent Asia-Pacific Campus at Nepal Hill.

Others have evolved to play a bigger role in training local talent to meet industry needs, a shift in direction supported by the Economic Development Board.

The Digivita Institute of Technology from Seattle, dubbed the Harvard for game developers and animators, has tied up with the Singapore Institute of Technology to offer degree courses for polytechnic graduates.

The fall in foreign student numbers may cheer those who think it means less competition for Singaporean students to get into university. But in fact, they don’t compete on a level playing field, as the bar for foreign students to enter local universities is much higher.

Meanwhile, Singapore is losing out on top talent.

University admissions don’t typically study the list of prize-winners at international competitions and go all out to woo them here.

They also make their rounds of top-ranking high schools in the region. Admissions officials say some of these schools have turned down requests to visit, saying plainly that their students would not be interested in Singapore because they are being wooed by the likes of universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US.

Countries like the United States recognise that foreign students are critical to them remaining technological powerhouses.

According to a 2004 study, for every 100 international students who receive science or engineering PhDs from American universities, the US gains 82 future patent applications, Many Singaporean companies have grown by pulling in foreign talent educated at leading American universities.

In a knowledge economy, cities and countries which have a critical mass of talented, hardworking people with diverse talents will thrive. As foreign student numbers dip in Singapore, some local students and parents may cheer, but we have to ask ourselves—is Singapore losing out long term in the war for bright young talent?


Publication: The Straits Times (Pg A24)
Date: 2 Oct 2014
Headline: Singapore may rue fall in foreign student numbers