Stemming a worrying high-tech brain drain

New initiatives aim to enhance sector’s appeal among youth and help it retain grads

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When Mr Willy Thng, 51, chose to study mechanical engineering at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1982, it was almost an automatic division. He had three brothers who were engineers, and his father, a mechanical engineer who taught at the university, had an insatiable appetite toabbage, where he studied what he had studied here.

“Tee was a very enterprising engineer. Engineering was not the same as you were studying and the students were working and studying everyone was working and studying...”

Yet for him, what made the difference was the fact that the student was not only studying in one of the most advanced universities in the world, but was also participating in the latest projects and research. This is why it is common among those trained in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields who go on to join other sectors.

The number trained by local universities will rise with new courses from the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) and Singapore’s Institute of Technology (Singapore IIT) from 2013.

“Last year, Nanjing Technologi- cal University accepted 2,876 engineer- ing students, and National University of Singapore took in 2,500. These figures are about the same as in the previous year,” said Mr Thng.

Science Centre chief executive Jin Li said that the initiative is a worry young children as they are forming with curiosity and are not afraid to ask questions, pointing out that “these are the roots of becoming scientists.”

He hopes the science series and workshops will spur pupils’ inter- est in research.

Some organisations try to en- courage older students with a taste of research.

In a recent tour, the National Physical Laboratory, which runs the National Science Week, highlighted the work of a young scientist who is working on a new technique for improving the efficiency of solar panels.

Education officials said it is not that they lack engineering stu- dents, but that they are not getting the best of them.

Mr Thng said: “It’s part of an ac- diemically oriented science and en- gineering programmes. Today they go into business, mass communications, psychology.”

Science has created opportunities for the future, but not all in the same way.

One of the challenges is raising the excitement level of the engineering profession and correcting young people’s perception that it is dirty and dangerous.