More choices for students in next 5 years

Up to 10 specialised institutions to be set up here, says PM Lee at opening of SMU campus

BY CHUA MIN HOONG & SANDRA DAYE

The university landscape here is undergoing a sea-change, with more autonomy for local universities and the influx of foreign ones.

And yesterday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong raised the bar for the tertiary education sector, announcing: “Over the next five years, we expect up to 10 specialised institutions to be set up in Singapore.”

Some will offer graduate and postgraduate programmes. Others will partner polytechnics to offer specialised degrees in applied and creative disciplines. The aim: to give students more choices, so they have many avenues to “excel and rise to the top.”

He added: “Taken together, these changes will dramatically transform our higher education landscape. We will create a whole new thriving industry of tertiary education, catering to both Singaporeans and foreigners alike.

“This will keep Singapore at the forefront of research, promote a cross-fertilisation of ideas, and help to nurture creativity and diversity in our small but vibrant cosmopolitan city.”

PM Lee was speaking at the official opening of Singapore Management University’s city campus in the heart of the civic district.

The tertiary education scene is abuzz with change and dynamism, he said. Change was necessary to help students learn to be creative and enterprising, and have the “habit of thinking in new and original ways” so they can compete in the knowledge economy.

Already, secondary and junior college students have a wider range of options — for example, having specialised schools for the arts and sports and opting for schools that do away with the GCE O level.

At the tertiary level, students can look forward to more diversity of courses as foreign institutions set up here.

For example, “niche” institutions such as the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, will offer hospitality programmes here in September. The Design Institute of Technology is slated to offer courses in 3D animation and games development next year.

The agency responsible for bringing these schools here is the Economic Development Board (EDB). Asked to respond to PM Lee’s new goal of having “up to 10” such institutions here, Mr Zenneth Tan, director (services), said EDB would attract institutions in niche areas such as arts and design, digital media, hospitality management and culinary arts to “add to the diverse mix of course offerings already available here.”

Yesterday’s opening of the SMU city campus marks 10 years of planning for Singapore’s third university.

SMU chairman Ho Kwon Ping recalled the journey from concept plan to the first collaboration with the Wharton School in 1999, the first convocation in 2000, and then the opening of the spanking new $450-million campus yesterday.

The 300 guests included donors and ministers. Prominent among them was former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, who steered the development of university education for years.

PM Lee noted that SMU students had developed a reputation for being “different”, and credited its broad-based curriculum and seminar-style teaching which encourages team work and class participation.

Beaming, expressive students featured prominently in the opening programme, from second-year business management student Candace Tan who sang the National Anthem a cappella, to first-year Muhammad Yusuf Shah, the reigning world heavyweight champion in silat, a Malay martial art, who performed a “fusion dance” with the lion dance troupe.