Meet our new ‘iPod’ generation

By Chua Chong Jin
For The Straits Times

In recent weeks, local universities have been going all out to promote themselves in ways which they hope will attract today's increasingly demanding and, hopefully, discerning students.

In its many advertisements, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has highlighted students who can "change the world with innovation", "bring the world to speed!" and "enrich the world with creativity". Quoting philosopher Rene Descartes, it even has an "I Think, Therefore I Am" ad featuring students who dare to think big.

On its part, Singapore Management University (SMU) has highlighted how its students have the competitive "more than" factor. Its advertisements declare that its students are "more than job seekers", they are "fast trackers". They are "more than scholars", they are "leaders of the new generation". They come to you. This posture, one might add, is fairly new — and long overdue — in a sector where market forces can be kept out in the name of intellectual depth, exclusivity or even mere idiosyncrasy.

Interestingly, even at the universities' advertising campaigns go into full swing, along come stories about these institutions which some may perceive as "negative". For instance, there have been objections from undergraduates causing a stir on campus with a mass e-mail message calling on students to get together to address the problem of foreign lecturers who speak poor or heavily accented English.

There is, in these stories, a point which has links to the glowing advertisements in which the three universities take pride. The responsive

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The National University of Singapore (NUS), on the other hand, stresses its global status. It shows how joining NUS means joining "the global league" and embracing the notion that "no dream is too high". The NUS Business School takes things a step further with its advertisements stressing its edge in terms of a rich campus life, global recognition and innovative programmes, even as NTU's Nanyang Business School and SMU locate their own distinctive edges. The former, for instance, has an "Always A Step Ahead" advertisement.

All this is fine and well. And credit goes to the universities for recognising one of the refreshing, if harsh, realities of today's marketplace. When there is competition (and that can only be good for Singapore's education landscape in the long run), consumers do not just come to you. Instead, you need to show them why they should

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