Cutting through the red tape

US don who helped improve Singapore's education is made honorary citizen

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PROFESSOR Robert Brown was stumped when he first learnt of the support services for university researchers here — it took "months and months" for an academic to buy equipment and spend money on research.

The International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP), of which he was a founding member, doubted they could persuade education officials to change a system seen as "positively, absolutely, under any condition, going to be honest".

"But it turned out it wasn't hard to convince people that the rest of the world didn't operate like this — that you had to operate with more trust in some arenas," said Prof Brown, then a Massachusetts Institute of Technology engineering don.

That was more than eight years ago. He is now president of Boston University and has continued to help improve Singapore's higher education and research scene.

Yesterday, he was conferred the lifelong Honorary Citizen Award, the highest form of recognition given by the Government to non-Singaporeans, at a ceremony at the Istana.

And Prof Brown wants to remain with the IAAP for "as long as they ask me to".

Although Singapore has made "huge jumps" in how it supports researchers, the services supply and infrastructure for research is an area that can be improved, he said. He also described officials here as "open to other points of view".

Commenting on Warwick's decision not to set up a campus here, he joked that "if Singapore's their bar, they can't go to China". His view is that it is better to "engage in a dialogue of values" than to remain disengaged.

He credits Singapore as the first in the region to recognise its shortcomings in creativity — by allowing for more diversity in the education system.

On the flip side, the United States highly regards Singapore for its mathematics and science standards, and Prof Brown would like this facet of the education system to remain.

"A lot of this discussion about creativity and intellectual freedom inside the curriculum has been to loosen up (the utilitarian, market approach) a bit, to let people broaden more than they would have done 25 years ago," he commented.

"My sense is SMU today is a much broader educational experience than Nanyang Technological University. And the National University of Singapore is somewhere in between, depending on what you decide to do," he said.

On the impact of the IAAP, he thinks the panel made a "very big difference" in the discussions about whether there should be a fourth local university and in the decision not to have a multi-campus model, which would "diffuse the quality of the system". The most recent issue he cited is preparing the universities for autonomy, by putting the governance structures in place.

But Singapore can look to Boston, with its nexus of great universities and research activities, as an education hub.

He said: "Singapore is well on its way to creating its own version of that between the universities, the A*Star research institutes, companies putting their research facilities here. But it doesn't mean the institutions have to model after Harvard or MIT."