Domestic institutions are scaling up their range of programmes for executives to meet exploding demand, writes Jonathan Hopfner

Singapore has attempted to position itself as a hub for many things - logistics, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals - but education could be its best bet.

Since the city-state's Economic Development Board laid out the welcome mat for "world-class" universities a decade ago, it has managed to coax the likes of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, and INSEAD to its shores.

Many of these schools have focused on serving Singapore's rapidly expanding market for continuing education, either alone or in concert with local partners. And domestic institutions are also scaling up their range of programmes for mid-career professionals to meet exploding demand.

In the 1990s, choices for executives looking for courses to hone their financial or management skills were relatively limited. This is no longer the case.

The National University of Singapore (NUS), which was a pioneer of sorts when it teamed up with Stanford to introduce an international management programme more than two decades ago, now offers multiple, open enrolment courses covering key business functions such as accounting and negotiation. This is in addition to its MBAs in English or Chinese run with partners such as UCLA or China's Peking University.

Sureish Devandra Nathan, director of executive education at NUS's business school, said the school had also seen "phenomenal" demand for customised programmes designed for corporate customers over the past 18 months.

Tailor-made courses where companies have a say in the curriculum are also seeing fast uptake at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), as is an advanced management certificate programme hosted in conjunction with the University of California Berkeley and separate MBA programmes, according to the executive director of NTU's executive education office, Nilanjan Sen.

Annie Koh, dean of executive and professional education at Singapore Management University (SMU), said the school did not offer an MBA yet, but one might be in the works. SMU has seen success with executive programmes built for firms such as Neptune Orient Lines, IBM and Schneider Electric. It runs about 45 of these courses a year, each catering to about 30 executives and some seeing repeat runs. These programmes "are for senior executives and are usually seen as a reward for jobs well done", said Ms Koh.

Representatives of Singapore's major institutions have noticed a substantial shift in the local corporate world's view of continuing education in recent years. What was once seen as a cost or liability is increasingly being viewed as a necessity.

Companies used to be "hesitant to invest [in education], as there was the thought that they'd train someone and they'd then move to a competitor", said Mr Nathan.

"But there is a recognition that in order to retain talent now they have to ensure [employees] develop the right management and leadership skill sets."

Dr Sen agreed: "Attitudes are changing significantly; the support for these kinds of programmes, the demand and the willingness of employers [to enrol staff] is definitely going up."

He said with barely any MBA options in Asia a decade ago, many executives who were now at the pinnacle of their careers felt an urge to go through a period of formal education, especially to boost "soft skills" such as managing people.

Much of the change in sentiment is also attributable to a looming crunch in talent supply in the region, especially at the mid to upper levels of management.

"Business in the Asia-Pacific region is booming at a rate where there are not enough managers to manage the growth, which is a major impetus to send people on these programmes," Mr Nathan said. "Because of a significant shortage of executives in nearly every sector, companies are telling us they need to get people trained in-house to take on leadership roles," Dr Sen said. "It makes it easier to retain quality people."

With schools in virtually every country in Asia gearing up to offer programmes of their own, Singapore institutions are likely to face a tougher battle for executive minds in the years ahead. But locals believe that the city and its universities boast some advantages that will prove difficult to replicate.

One location - Singapore's position at the heart of Southeast Asia means professionals attending many courses here can expect to network with a student body that spans the region. Around half of those in NUS's executive programmes, for example, come from outside Singapore.

Another is the city's high concentration of multinationals - almost 7,000 are headquartered there, meaning learners are rarely short of expertise or career opportunities. Mr Nathan said Singapore's rags-to-riches story and squeaky-clean reputation also stood it in good stead, with many participants in NUS courses "associating [the school] with Singapore's success". 