Get over UNSW shock and aim even higher

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Columnist

EDUCATION for export.
It’s public service, but it’s also a business – with financial risks.
There must be lessons we can learn from the shock pullout of the University of New South Wales (UNSW).
Even as the mending of relations takes place, will we recover from the setback to forge ahead and aim even higher?
Can Singapore re-assess the strategies for our goal of becoming an education hub? Can we, one day, be a “supplier” of education, marketing our education products and services abroad, like Australia and the UK?
Can we even compete with them for a piece of the overseas campus pie? Why not?
The Singapore brand commands a lot of respect in the region.
Ditto for Singapore’s education system, which receives students from all corners of Asia.
Becoming an education hub goes beyond bringing students to our city for studies.
It is also about making a Singapore education available to as many students as possible. So when the students cannot come to us, we can go to them.
Indeed, since we already have the Singapore International School for overseas Singaporeans in parts of Asia, why not leverage on it? Build it up to attract those who want a better education.
Courses can be designed in collaboration with Singapore-based schools that allow the student to take important parts of the course in Singapore while completing a majority of it in his own country.
This can just be the catalyst Singapore needs to make its mark in becoming a globally-recognised brand.
To assess the potential of this idea, we may want to use India as a case study.
Financial Times reported last month that of the 400,000 fresh graduates in India each year, fewer than 120,000 meet global labour standards and are hardly employable by the fast-expanding Indian companies and MNCs pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into India.
To counter this, leading firms such as Infosys have set up expansive campuses in cities like Mysore.
Each year, 40,000 of Infosys’ fresh hires attend an 18-month training course in Mysore that brings them up to speed with industry standards.
The students learn everything from Java programming to management skills.
Wipro, one of India’s largest software company, has gone even to the extent of proposing that the Indian government allow them to run public schools from the 11th grade onwards (equivalent to our junior colleges), to ensure a minimum quality required of fresh graduates.
Imagine the take-up rate if Singapore education institutions enter the scene to provide high-standard education with quality assurance and consistency.

HUGE POTENTIAL

With incomes rising across Asia, more students from the region are being sent overseas for studies, and that would provide greater demand.
If Singapore enters the overseas market, the potential is huge. Singapore education will reach not just 150,000 tertiary students here, but millions more in places out there.
It is good for an educational institution to achieve the efficiency of a business, while maintaining focus on the basic tenet of providing quality education.
Singapore is already in a good position to ensure that such institutions have a double bottom-line – financial and social.
We are on the right track; we just need to add a little more oomph to our approach.
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