Nanyang Biz School aims high

New dean wants its MBA to be among world’s top 25 by 2013, reports LEE U-WEN

Being part of a school with a flagship graduate programme ranked 4th in the world is something that new Nanyang Business School (NBS) dean Jendra Singh is hard to beat.

And who can blame him? After all, during his previous job teaching at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, the Master of Business Administration (MBA) course there topped the Financial Times’ global rankings no fewer than eight times in the last 10 years.

However, Prof Singh - who became NBS dean last September after a year-long global recruitment drive - sees the plus points in his school’s current position.

For one, it is the highest that a Singaporean business school has ever been ranked in the prestigious survey of the world’s top universities. It also means that the NBS - which is part of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) - improved 21 spots from its 67th place last year.

Meanwhile, the National University of Singapore (NUS) did not even make the top 100. And Singapore Management University’s (SMU) one-year MBA programme, which enrolled its first intake only in January, is too new to be placed.

Speaking to The Business Times in his first full interview since coming to Singapore last August, Prof Singh, 53, said he was not even looking for a job when NTU came calling.

“I was a chaired professor at Wharton, one of the best business schools in the world. I wasn’t interested in being dean; I was happy being a professor,” the father of two said.

The clincher, however, came after a lunch he had with NTU board of trustees chairman Koh Boon Hwee in San Francisco last year.

Prof Singh recalled, “I told the board I was interested in aiming high, and promised that they would do whatever it took for me to be successful as NBS dean.”

Soon, the contract was signed and Prof Singh made his return to Asia, after spending the previous 20 years at Wharton.

He has now fixed his sights on a lofty target: to elevate the Nanyang MBA to the top 25 in the world by the end of his six-year term.

He recalled the incredulous reaction from his staff when they heard of his goal. “Some of them looked at me as if I was from another planet! But my message was as long as I am dean, we are going to aim high.”

Also on his agenda is to push for the support and funds to construct a new building for NBS, to cater to the growing foreign student intake as well as meet the demand from locals.

The current enrolment stands at 4,200. Each year, the NBS admissions office turns away straight-A students due to space constraint, while only 20 per cent of MBA applicants eventually get admitted.

Looking ahead, the busy Prof Singh has another hat to wear, having been tasked by university president Subra Suresh to create an Indian agenda for NTU, in a vein similar to how the university has already built extensive links with China.

Said Prof Singh: “We need to get NTU more engaged with India. I have extensive contacts with the highest level of business leadership in India. I believe in time to come, more students will go to Indian companies for internships.”

While he certainly has enough on his plate for now, Prof Singh muses towards the end of the interview that he wished he had time to play his favourite game, tennis, more often.

“It’s tough finding time. All my colleagues are working me too hard!” joked the avid sportsman, who even has a brown belt in karate to his name.

Turning back to the immediate task at hand, Prof Singh hopes to one day etch his name in the NBS history books.

“Yes, rankings are important and they have an effect on what we do. But ultimately, history is the best judge, and only time will tell how successful my team and I have been.”