Getting a taste of success from Israel’s R&D labs

S’pore delegation in Jerusalem to see how varsities turn ideas into dollars

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IN JERUSALEM

CHEW on this: the next time you bite a cherry tomato, a top Israeli university is probably tasting a juicy slice of the harvest profits.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem developed the first cherry tomatoes, the sales of which amounted to US$50 million (S$72 million) in 2005. This is just one of its spectacular successes.

Its technology transfer company Yissum (the Hebrew word for “application”), has granted some 400 technology licences culled from the university’s research, and is responsible for commercialising a range of products which generate US$1 billion in sales each year.

“Every researcher is his own small boss,” said Professor Hillel Bercovier, the university’s vice-president for research and development.

“We invent in brains, and encourage them to become entrepreneurs.”

It is this mindset that has attracted a high-level study delegation from Singapore to Jerusalem.

Led by National Research Foundation head Dr Tony Tan, the team has visited top universities, industry research labs, technology incubators and venture capitalists to look at the red-hot entrepreneurial environment, with a special focus on how universities commercialise their research.

Mrs Tan Ching Yee, Permanent Secretary (Education), one of the delegates on the trip, said that a critical component of such efforts was the “bilingual” professional who could provide commercial know-how to scientists, while speaking the language of research.

Poking out how tertiary institutions in Singapore were just teaching facilities until eight years ago, she said: “Because of the nascent nature of the research push, the culture has to be built up.”

This is already happening.

The National University of Singapore has consolidated a system which includes seed money, space for incubators at the university, expertise to commercialise work and start-ups for students at high-tech hubs like Silicon Valley.

Nanyang Technological University, which has seen a handful of researchers striking gold with their innovations, is embarking on a concerted effort to get its students to do the same.

NTU Associate Provost Er Meng Hwa: “Our best bet moving forward is investing in students, something which we have not really invested in so far.”

The Singapore Management University, meanwhile, is coordinating an entrepreneurship collaboration involving students and faculty exchange and programme development between Israel’s famed Technion Institute of Technology and Singapore’s university.

Polytechnics also have an important role to play, and their trump card is their close industry links.

Said Singapore Polytechnic principal Tan Han Cheong: “We can provide a bridge between university and industry.”

Indeed, polytechnic staff and students are already working with research institutes and companies on various projects in areas ranging from digital media to biotechnology, and have innovation centres, technology offices and on-site incubation space for start-ups.

But to make the vision a success, Singaporeans have to get over their tendency to conform and develop “entrepreneurial DNA” — in the spirit of one young Israeli company founder who said that he wanted to be an entrepreneur “the day I was born.”

Said the Dean of SMU’s school of information systems Steven Miller: “There’s more of a recognition that it has to come from bottom up. You need to have a lot of independent players to do things on their own.

“There’s an effort now to seed a culture shift in Singapore.”