Learning for the real world

Hands-on experience, enterprise on the lesson plan for students with special edge

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THE accolades have been pouring in, more so after recent overhauls to provide Singaporeans with different pathways to success. But for the education system, "good" is no longer enough — not if the Republic is to join the league of top cities.

This is why Singapore is taking further steps to, in outgoing Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam’s words, "(throw) up individuals with a special edge and passion for what they do.

On top of a fourth university with an entrepreneurial bent and a liberal arts college, a new School of Science and Technology (SST) will open its doors in 2010 to offer another route for bright students with an interest in applied learning.

Said Mr Shanmugaratnam: "We know our future has to be in innovation, in every field we engage in — whether in media and design, in financial services, or in precision engineering. It requires a whole team ... but it also requires a special cut of individuals. They are the ones who think in original ways, do things differently and who keep the leading cities spinning differently."

The SST, he said, would offer a new option for students "likely to be university-bound and who want both a solid academic foundation and immersion in real-world applications".

"The SST will be the fourth specialised independent school, after the NUS High School of Mathematics and Science, the Sports School and the School of the Arts. Set up by the Education Ministry in collaboration with Ngee Ann Polytechnic, it will offer a four-year O-level programme, teaching regular school as added competition.

Dunman Secondary principal Edelweis Kho, whose 12-year-old son enjoys his robotics lessons at Rulang Primary, believed the negative mindset has changed.

"In the past, there was a lack of information and many misconceptions. SST principal-designate Chua stressed that applied learning is "not totally disconnected from the traditional, academically-oriented way of learning that we are so used to".

"It's really a training of the mind ... the students who graduate from the SST would have the life skills and tools to help them through the education system."

And such skills would not be out of place in the proposed fourth university or the liberal arts college, in which multi-disciplinary learning would be the centrepiece.

Yesterday, Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew — who is chairing a committee looking into the expansion of the university sector — gave a glimpse of its preliminary recommendations.

The fourth public-funded university would offer an "integrated, interdisciplinary approach to learning, real-world experience and entrepreneurship". While many universities already have interdisciplinary programmes, Rear-Admiral Lui noted: "Pre-existing conditions such as organisational structure and culture, budgeting and manpower allocation sometimes limit the extent of such programmes and how much they can achieve."

On the liberal arts college, he explained that given the high fees and relative novelty of the concept here, it would be more prudent for it to start off as an institution affiliated with an existing university. Already, two have registered their interest in providing a liberal arts education.

The National University of Singapore has submitted a proposal to set an autonomous liberal arts college, similar to the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, offering disciplines in natural, social sciences, mathematics and humanities.

A spokesman for the Singapore Management University said it is considering introducing a special liberal arts programme, under which students would be "accorded great flexibility in their selection of courses in the first two years, and will only be required to select a concentration or major in their third year."

RAdm Lui’s committee will submit its full recommendations to the Government in August, after consulting an international advisory panel.

— ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY NS JING YNG