Lack of drive in S’porean students a worry

BY ANDREA ONG

THE Education Minister is concerned about the number of employers who have said that Singaporean students lack drive and the confidence to venture out of their comfort zone.

These are the very qualities that chief executives and entrepreneurs singled out to him as being essential to succeeding in the competitive global playing field.

Mr Heng Swee Keat was speaking to some 300 university students at a forum at the Singapore Management University (SMU) last night.

He recounted his meeting earlier in the day with a group of CEOs who own their own companies.

When he asked what personal qualities are necessary to succeed, many of them said: Drive. “They said, ‘We think this is going to be critical (but) I do not see enough of this,’” said Mr Heng, who was surprised at the number of CEOs who mentioned it.

“I said, how can that be? Our students work very hard,” he added. He had a long discussion with them, which did not throw up any solutions.

Another missing trait in students here is their willingness to leave their comfort zones and try something new, said Mr Heng.

One CEO described the differing responses from a Singaporean worker and a European worker, when promoted.

In Europe, when the CEO told workers he wanted to try them out in a new role with different responsibilities, “the staff asked, what sort of training will I get, how will you help me succeed, what will I do, and so on”, he said.

But when the CEO approached Singaporeans, he was shocked by the response: “What if I fail? Do I still have a job? Is there a support system, and do I get retrenchment benefits?”

Mr Heng said students will also need two other qualities: An ability to adapt in a rapidly changing world and to collaborate across cultures.

He said these qualities are a means to achieving a meaningful career, which was a subject he chose to speak about at the start of the forum.

Besides looking towards their aspirations, students should also look outwards and to the future, said Mr Heng, a first-term minister.

SMU business undergraduate Mohamad Irshad, 22, agreed with Mr Heng that Singaporean students will need to be more adaptable as they go out into the global working world.

“Many of us will not end up doing jobs related to our degrees. We will have to be more adaptable, more street smart — things that are not taught in school,” said Mr Irshad.

He is also the president of SMU Apolitical, the association which organised the forum, which was also attended by students of the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University.

Mr Heng also sketched out three challenges which Singapore faces going forward.

One, the challenge of “man against machine”, which will persist as technological advancements transform the economy and workforce. Two, the instability of the global economy, which means that financial crises will recur.

With Europe mired in a debt crisis and many countries fighting high unemployment, another crisis is on the horizon, and there is no guarantee that the economy will continue to grow, said Mr Heng.

Three, increasing competition from giant developing economies like China and India, which boast a surfeit of cheap talent and a large domestic consumer base — factors Singapore lacks.

Mr Heng cited a recent New York Times article on Apple, an American company which now manufactures its products in China. Apple’s executives needed an estimated 8,700 engineers to oversee the workers manufacturing iPhones. Analysts predicted it would take nine months to find that many qualified engineers in the United States, but in China, it took just 15 days.

To address these challenges, there needs to be a “Singapore plus plus” strategy centred on a strong Singaporean core, he said.

“Developing that core allows us to create many more opportunities for many people, including people in the lower income group,” he added.

He will speak more on plans to develop Singaporean talent in a few weeks’ time.

The “Singaporean core” will be augmented by skilled foreigners who are the next “plus”, which is being able to connect with the rest of the world.