

Improving the Role of Private Education Institutions

Industry players and the government need to rethink the role and services of such bodies vis-à-vis the big international players and public institutions.

Dr Faizal bin Yahya

The Business Times, 09 June 2017

WITH the government's emphasis on lifelong learning and professional conversion programmes, is our private education industry the weak link in this effort, or is it ready to play a key role in shaping our workforce and the transformation of the Singapore economy?

The outlook for private education institutions (PEIs) is mixed and uncertain for some. Industry players and the government urgently need to bring clarity to their role and services vis-à-vis the big international players and public institutions.

Who are our PEIs? PEIs registered with the Committee of Private Education (CPE) include those offering (i) education leading to a diploma or degree, or full-time post-secondary education leading to a certificate; or (ii) full-time preparatory courses for placement tests for local mainstream schools or for external examinations. Also included are Foreign System Schools (FSS) offering full-time primary or secondary education in accordance with a foreign or international curriculum, and private special education schools.

There are close to 300 such schools registered with the Ministry of Education (MOE), of which about 30 are considered international schools. They offer programmes ranging from pre-school education to post-graduate degrees. In 2015, 2,872 courses were offered by PEIs, of which 16 per cent were under FSS.

Singapore's biggest private school, the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), hit a high of 23,000 enrolment, with 20,000 locals, in 2013. Subsequently, its total number fell to 21,500 (18,000 locals) in 2014, but its foreign student numbers increased from 3,000 to 3,500. PEIs provide a vital alternative for locals who are unable to secure a place at our public universities or afford overseas studies.

To understand the current state of the industry, it helps to recall the 2002 Global Schoolhouse Programme mooted for Singapore to capture a bigger slice of the then US\$2.2 trillion global education market. An ambitious target of 150,000 full-fee paying students by 2015 was established, from the then estimated number of 50,000. Coming at the tail-end of the 2001 economic recession, it was aimed at boosting our competitiveness and human capital.

Policy-makers wanted to establish an optimal mix of institutions to attract more international students to Singapore. At the top tier were world-class universities with centres of excellence undertaking R&D (research and development) and knowledge transfer to industry. Next were public universities such as the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University; the third tier comprised other private universities.

The programme encountered various problems in the succeeding years. First, while Singapore was able to attract well-known foreign institutions such as Insead, others withdrew their campuses and programmes. Second, several cases of fraud were uncovered in the

industry. Third, more broadly, there had been growing public anger and debate over the sustainability of a liberal immigration regime. The government began to tighten the inflow of foreign students and workers, blunting Singapore's ambitions of becoming a broad-based education hub.

By 2009, the government had shifted its focus towards building industry-relevant manpower capabilities and sought to attract, develop and retain talent for the Singapore economy as the "war for talent" erupted on a global level. It would emphasise the quality of education and relevance to our economy, and not student numbers or GDP share.

Indeed, the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) has been encouraging the introduction of industry-relevant programmes at our universities. The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) is working with Seattle's DigiPen Institute of Technology, renown for game development and animation, to offer degree courses for polytechnic graduates. EDB has collaborated with companies to bring in leadership centres and training programmes for corporate executives. For example, Sony University has established a Singapore campus to train managers and business leaders for the future. Unilever has also established its Four Acre campus in Singapore. These moves make for a vibrant environment for career and professional development. However, new public universities such as the SIT are also offering courses traditionally provided by PEIs, thereby competing for the same student pools e.g. diploma holders from the local polytechnics.

Evolving Mission?

In 2016, MOE announced the formation of a new statutory board, SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG), to drive and coordinate the implementation of SkillsFuture. The CPE was placed under the SSG, suggesting an intent to better align the private education sector closer to the SkillsFuture movement.

Indeed, some of the PEIs have been approved by SSG to conduct SkillsFuture professional conversion programmes. These include Comat Training Services Pte Ltd, which runs courses on IT, soft skills and workplace health and safety. Lithan Academy undertakes IT and desktop support services training. 3dsense Media School and CG Protégé Animation School provide training for the creative industries in relation to computer graphics. Others such as 4As Limited provide training in digital advertising. In the area of pre-school teacher training, KLC International Institute undertakes programmes for SkillsFuture.

Singaporeans can use their S\$500 SkillsFuture Credit for approved courses delivered by any PEI, and could also seek funding of up to S\$5,000 for courses under the SkillsFuture Study Awards Scheme. Some PEI undergraduate and postgraduate courses receive funding for IT and IMDA-approved courses under this scheme. For example, mid-career Singaporeans wanting to deepen their IT skills for the thriving infocomm and media sector could apply for the awards.

To strengthen this sector, the government and industry players may wish to consider the following suggestions:

First, PEIs could serve as a complement to traditional educational pathways instead of offering similar products as public institutions. For example, they could provide training for specific sectors such as food & beverage (F&B), as schools like Auston and Shatec have done over

the years. They could also deliver training for Singaporeans under the SkillsFuture Mid-Career Enhanced Subsidy and Work-Study Degree programmes. Currently, these are administered only by public institutions.

Second, while government funding in education is critical, selective government subsidies for private schools may skew competition unfairly, and lead to a crutch mentality among those that do not have sustainable business models.

Third, the proliferation of subsidised courses, when provided by large educational institutions such as Kaplan, James Cook University and SUSS, has the potential to crowd out specialised training institutes that offer similar coursework. While some overlap is unavoidable, there is a need for more oversight on which institutes should be able to provide what kinds of courses.

Fourth, to promote more trust and assurance in PEIs, the CPE has introduced the Enhanced Registration Framework and mandatory standards in the areas of governance, information transparency and quality of service provisions. A voluntary Edu Trust Certification which ranges from a validity period of one (Edu Trust Provisional) to four years (Edu Trust and Edu Trust Star) was also established as a benchmark for PEIs to demonstrate their quality. Some analysts have mooted for Edu Trust Star PEIs, such as La Salle College for the Arts, to be given incentives like more inclusion in SkillsFuture Schemes.

PEIs can retain and boost their traditional role in retraining and upgrading our workforce. But they and the government would need to develop better channels of communication and coordination.

The writer is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He contributes to the work of the economics and business cluster and looks closely at the issues faced by Singapore's SMEs.