

Not surprising for PM to include education in rally **Changes in higher education in line with ESC recommendations earlier in year**

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While many observers were surprised at the inclusion of the education component in Sunday's National Day Rally speech, the changes announced on higher education, however, are in line with the recommendations of the Economic Strategies Committee (ESC) earlier this year.

The ESC's Subcommittee on Making Singapore a Leading Global City had proposed making Singapore the best home for talent as one of the three strategies to fulfil the vision of Singapore as a global city in Asia. As part of this broad strategy, the subcommittee proposed that Singapore offers education and development opportunities in world-class institutions.

According to their report, it is important to stretch the potential of Singaporeans, and attract top quality people from around the world in order to develop and engage talent. To achieve this, key recommendations include attracting or developing at least five world-class institutions or programmes by 2020 to provide talent development pathways in a wider range of disciplines and to support developments in new areas.

So how are these recommendations related to the measures announced in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's rally speech? Firstly, the steps taken to encourage universities here to build their endowment funds by providing 3-to-1 matching to donations to endowments for a period of time and providing a 1.5-to-1 ratio for existing universities, has sent a signal for universities here to be more financially independent. This is, however, not new. 'When the Singapore Management University (SMU) started, there was also a 3-to-1 donations to endowments ratio, which worked well,' said Josephine Teo, Member of Parliament and Chair of the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Education. 'Universities here are set up with greater autonomy and so with more autonomy comes greater financial responsibility,' explained Ms Teo.

However, it is not just financial responsibility that is the intended outcome here. 'The universities here are operating on an autonomous basis and what the government is trying to do is to increase the universities' flexibility in raising funds,' explained Member of Parliament Inderjit Singh.

Peaks of excellence

Building new sources of funding and strengthening existing ones will allow the universities to develop new opportunities to develop peaks of excellence. Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, elaborates: 'Endowments need to be used in a more systematic manner by supporting students who cannot afford tuition fees and also to develop peaks of excellence.'

This was reiterated by Nominated Member of Parliament Assoc Prof Paulin Tay Straughan, who is also vice-dean of the faculty of arts and social sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS). 'Growing (the) endowment means creating additional funds that the respective universities can use to support special programmes that facilitate differentiation of the curriculum,' she said.

These new peaks of excellence will give fruition to the ESC subcommittee's recommendations of providing talent development pathways in a wider range of disciplines and to support developments in new areas. Dr Koh explains that since developing these programmes will lead to absolute cost increase, the government would want to share the burden and associated risks by seeding the idea of new sources of funding.

Another point made by Mr Lee during his speech was the complex admission structure of universities here, which stands at 26 per cent of the cohort, compared to world-class institutions elsewhere, which admit only about 0.5 per cent of their cohort.

We have already seen that the ESC subcommittee recommends developing at least five world-class institutions or programmes by 2020. In Singapore's bid to have more world-class institutions here, will we see smaller institutions emerging? Will this lead to a two-tier higher education landscape with smaller and prestigious institutions, catering to the cream of the crop of each cohort, emerging alongside our public universities? The answer to the first question is yes and the second, no.

Ms Teo explains that the value of a good university is also in retaining talent and acting as a magnet for new talent. Due to this, she sees Singapore having both large, established multi-disciplinary institutions as well as smaller ones.

She clarified that although there will be smaller institutions in Singapore over time, which will cater to a student body of less than 10,000, these will be complementary to existing ones instead of creating a tiered system.

'Whenever we start a new university, it is not about replicating existing ones but about what additions we can make to the higher education landscape here so that more opportunities will emerge for students,' she pointed out.

She illustrated this thought with the example of the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). 'If we had just expanded NUS or the NTU (Nanyang Technological University), we would have satisfied the need but lost the chance to create another vibrant and distinctive institution,' elaborated Ms Teo.

Attracting talent

Mr Singh, who is also a member of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education and on the NTU Board of Trustees, put it in perspective. 'Since the two big universities (NUS and NTU) already have their areas of excellence, there will not be any scaling back for them, while it is unlikely that SMU and SUTD will not be grown too big,' he clarified. 'Our big universities also have their strengths so they too, and not just smaller institutions, can attract talent. However, the aim is for all our institutions, big or small, to attract and retain the brightest talent,' suggests Mr Singh.

Ms Teo brings us back to the recommendations of the ESC. 'Cities with good universities also attract investment. If we want to position ourselves as a globally distinctive city, then we must carve out education as a vibrant sector,' she concluded.

As laid out in the ESC report, higher education is set to become a useful catalyst in Singapore's economic and social development. It is thus not surprising that Mr Lee shared these developments in his rally with Singaporeans.