

Interaction key to better policymaking

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ACADEMICS and policymakers need to interact more with the public, including the non-English-speaking public.

Greater interaction will allow them to get the public's views on policies, which could foster a 'sharper and more useful policymaking environment', said former Asean secretary-general Ong Keng Yong.

The 54-year-old, who stepped down this January, became director of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Monday, filling a post vacant since 2004 when then-director Tommy Koh became its chairman.

Set up by then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong in 1988 to study local policy issues, the IPS became an autonomous research centre within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy early this year.

Mr Ong outlined IPS' new directions in a phone interview yesterday. An ambassador-at-large, he was in London en route to Turkmenistan on a work trip.

At IPS, he intends to focus on issues like food and energy security, and how Singapore can better deal with the challenges of a globalised world, like the integration of foreign talent into local society.

Said Mr Ong: 'It will be fun. Many think a think-tank's work is dry and one-dimensional. I think there should be another dimension to it. There can be interesting and lively exchanges.'

That is a reason why he hopes to narrow the distance between the public and researchers.

First, he plans to raise the public profile of IPS researchers through existing platforms like forums, seminars and workshops.

Second, he hopes that IPS, which is already working with several non-English-speaking artists and cultural personalities, could reach out to more of them to get their inputs on public policies.

He also wants it to work more closely with other think-tanks here.

IPS shares the same goals as the policymakers, he reiterated, adding:

'As a think-tank involved in public policies, IPS must be critical at times. But it remains on the same side as the policymakers, with aims of promoting greater understanding of and communication with different

respective constituencies. If not, we're not going to get the desired results.'

The post is a new challenge for the law-trained career diplomat, who once served as press secretary to then-PM Goh.

Mr Ong said he was approached in January for the IPS post. He considered it while on a sabbatical at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and accepted it on his return last month.

'I thought, the IPS, being a think-tank, would be a good place for me to spend time to do more thinking, especially after a tiring job as Asean secretary-general, he said.

'In a way, the skills set of the IPS director is not that different from a diplomat's. We have to look at issues, bring different views to a certain consensus, and review what we have gathered about a certain policy.'