

Innovation key focus of new varsity model

That is what will create value and raise incomes, says Tharman

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NEW YORK: As Singapore expands its university sector, it must aim for a new model of tertiary education that prizes innovation and creativity, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Speaking on Tuesday after a tour of American universities that place a premium on learning on the job and close ties with industry, he held up key takeaways that could shape the Government's decision on whether to have a fifth university or expand the existing institutions.

First, he noted the emphasis of these universities on project-based, experiential learning through work and research internships. Then, there is the stress on faculty with deep industry experience to inject dynamism and new ideas. Last, there is the strong slant towards research that can solve real-life problems. "The

three things come together and it is about being connected to the outside world."

Mr Tharman made these observations after visiting several practice-focused institutions in Boston and New York along with members of a review committee looking into providing more university places for Singaporeans. The 15-member committee is headed by Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong who also toured the institutions.

Mr Tharman had joined them in his capacity as chairman of a global panel that advises the Government on shaping the higher education sector. The International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP) will meet in July to study the preliminary report of the university review committee.

Drawing from what he and the study team had seen here, he said it was important to groom students to be innovators and creators. Mr Tharman, who is also Finance and Manpower Minister, said whatever jobs people do in the future, they will need deeper skills and expertise.

But he stressed: "The key competitive strength for every sector will have to be innovation, as that is what will raise productivity, create value and raise incomes and standards of living further."

The team toured four universities: Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art and the Polytechnic Institute of New York University.

All had innovated to nurture students with deep skills and expertise but also oriented to the real world. One other quality they prize: flexibility of mind.

At Worcester, for example, students take on projects to solve problems identified by faculty, non-governmental organisations or companies.

Said Mr Tharman: "Students are not just learning the theory and then doing some projects to show they have learnt those concepts. They try and solve real-life problems to learn concepts."

And though most are specialist institutions focused on engineering and technology-related disciplines, they value the humanities as essential grounding subjects. Cooper Union and Worcester, for example, require their engineering students to study the humanities and social sciences.

Mr Tharman noted that while none of these innovations was entirely unique, in these universities, they came together "in an intense way and help them differentiate themselves within the university landscape" with graduates who are highly sought after.

"At the end of the day, parents and students have to be convinced that pursuing practice-based learning up to the highest level will pay off," he said.

He added that the review committee's preliminary report will be "meat" for the 13-member IAAP to deliberate on the setting up of another new university.

But he said the panel will also look at other issues, including how to develop peaks of excellence in the social sciences.

The review committee led by Mr Wong will tour two other universities before wrapping up its week-long visit.

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