Quest for the 'SIT DNA'

Varsity's president-designate wants to produce graduates who can 'learn, unlearn and relearn'

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The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) will start its programme combining job attachments with studies in a small way, offering them to students on a select few courses.

But it hopes to grow it into a distinctive "signature programme" of the university.

"We aim to make it the programme that SIT will become known for, what students will pick us for. It will be one of the things that will differentiate us from the other universities," SIT's president-designate, Professor Tan Thiam Soon, told The Sunday Times.

The details are still being worked out but the work-study programme is likely to be launched when SIT offers its own degrees by 2015.

In August, it was announced that SIT and SIM University will expand to offer more places to those who want a degree. UniSIM will add full-time degrees to its part-time offerings and SIT, which runs niche degree programmes with overseas university partners, will start offering its own degrees too.

This year, polytechnic upgraders make up more than 90 per cent of the SIT's intake of 1,300 students.

The Education Ministry said the courses at SIT and UniSIM will be more practice-oriented and closely linked to industry. Both will offer programmes combining job attachments with study, called "cooperative education" in the United States.

Prof Tan said he and his senior officials had been overseas to study the cooperative education models at Drexel and Northeastern universities in the US, and Waterloo University in Canada. All have strong points and are successful in their own right, but SIT wants its own model to take work-study integration further and benefit graduates here.

In the US, the co-op programme has meant better job prospects for graduates. For example, more than a third of Drexel graduates, who can clock as much as 18 months of work experience in a five-year degree course, land jobs with their co-op employers even while studying.

Their work experience is valued and this is reflected in higher starting salaries than what fresh graduates from other universities command.

Prof Tan accepts that boosting job prospects is important, but he also wants to develop a unique co-op programme that nurtures what he calls the "SIT DNA".

"I want the SIT graduate to be adaptable – to be able to 'learn, unlearn and relearn'," he said, borrowing from futurist Alvin Toffler, who famously said that the "illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn".

Prof Tan said that in the Singapore context, flexibility and the ability to adapt will be crucial.

"We are in the 21st century, where change is constant and jobs will come and go. Singapore, being a small, open economy, will have to be nimble and keep adapting to these changes.

"So we have to think how we can best prepare our students for work that will change all the time."

He said the polytechnic graduates at SIT already have the basis to build the SIT DNA.

Employers have noted that those who take the polytechnic route tend to be hardworking and hungry for success, street-smart, resourceful and entrepreneurial.

Prof Tan said young people have to know that as Singapore produces more graduates, there will be differentiation in the job market.

"It's already happening," he said, noting that employers already see a difference in graduates of the Singapore Management University, National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University.

"Some prefer the graduates of one university over the other and are willing to place them in higher positions and pay them more."

He hopes SIT graduates will stand out for being adaptable and flexible.

"When an employer announces that he wants to change course or relocate to another country, I hope it is the SIT graduate who will be the first to raise his hand," he said.

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