

In a class beyond rankings

Universities here should not chase rankings at the expense of their role in advancing Singapore – this was a point made by Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) **Ong Ye Kung** in his keynote speech at The Straits Times Education Forum at Singapore Management University on June 25. Here is an excerpt.

Beyond teaching, research and the discipline of discovering and creating knowledge remain one of the essential missions of Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs). This is particularly relevant to universities.

World-class research talent and capabilities are central to the achievement of Singapore's goal to be an advanced knowledge economy and a culturally rich society.

Today, research accounts for a significant part of the scoring in the international rankings of universities. Having good rankings is not a bad thing for students at all, as they will be better regarded when seeking employment in the marketplace after graduation. Good rankings also help attract diverse talent to our universities.

The rise in the rankings of the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University are very significant achievements that we can be very proud of.

But we must also recognise that rankings, done by private organisations, are based on criteria that may not entirely align with the public missions of our IHLs and universities. Rankings provide a gauge of the quality of our institutions, but they do not do justice to the intangible and important role that IHLs play in shaping our society and nurturing Singaporeans.

We should not chase rankings blindly, in the same way that we tell students and parents not to chase grades blindly.

In Singapore, the danger we face is not an "UnCollege" movement but a possible dislocation of priorities – of having top-ranked, world-class universities that belong to the world but not to Singapore.

There is a perception that our universities are focused only on publication and research. We need to correct that misperception. If universities only focus on research, then they are no different from any research centre.

Universities must demonstrate how they are fulfilling all their core missions that I mentioned earlier, to impart skills, to create and

transmit knowledge, and to shape and define society. The university scene must therefore be truly diverse – where not every institution is just focused on research and knowledge creation. Some will put strong emphasis on excellent teaching and developing skills mastery in students.

Others will take pride in forging close collaboration with industries, or encouraging entrepreneurship among the young. Some others will be positioned uniquely to work with the Government and contribute to public policy-making or major public projects.

One of the reasons I admire American universities is their ability to produce Ben Bernankes and Janet Yellens.

Most of the time, they do research and teach but, when the situation calls for it, they step forth to take on major public and global responsibilities.

In Singapore, we have our share – Professor S. Jayakumar and Dr Yaacob Ibrahim in politics; Professor Tommy Koh and Professor Chan Heng Chee, who are our top diplomats; Professor Tan Kong Yam as chief economist at the Ministry of Trade and Industry; Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, who is now president of NUS but, before that, was director of medical services in the Ministry of Health; Professor Lim Chong Yah and Professor Lim Pin, who led the National Wages Council for many years and contributed to

tripartite collaboration and industry harmony in Singapore.

Our universities must aim to be a brain trust of talent and expertise across many disciplines and domains. To do so, they must have talent management systems that adopt an expansive definition of contribution and impact – one that is not narrowly defined by the number of research papers published in international journals.

If we do this right, our IHLs will progressively build up their diverse and deep pool of talent, across various disciplines and domains, drawing from academia, industries and government. They will be a significant social force – for good.

Let us have a talent pool that conducts research to strengthen

society's knowledge of science and the humanities; one that offers frontier technology to change businesses and industries, and insights and ideas to shape and improve public policies.

Our IHLs must have people who will step forward to shoulder public responsibilities, and work side by side with the Government on major projects.

They must nurture, guide and inspire young people through excellent teaching. In this teaching, there must be a moral message that, having received a good education and benefiting from the Singapore system, our young people have a duty to society at large. A duty to make things better, to make us better.



Mr Ong Ye Kung with students at Singapore Management University on June 25. Universities must nurture and inspire the young, he said. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI