

YEAR IN REVIEW: HIGHER EDUCATION

A quiet but fairly productive year

Several major schools expand physical presence here while local players venture into Iskandar

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BY most accounts, it was a relatively quiet but still fairly productive year as far as Singapore's higher education sector was concerned.

The Republic saw several more campuses of top international universities start to take shape, while some local players expanded their brands up north in the bustling Iskandar Malaysia region in Johor.

A number of renowned institutions also launched new master's, PhD and executive education programmes here over the last 12 months, all in a bid to carve a bigger slice out of the country's multi-billion dollar private education industry for themselves.

Among the many milestones in the sector was an inaugural conference organised by the Council for Private Education (CPE), a statutory board under the Education Ministry, in April.

At that event, Senior Minister of State for Education Indranee Rajah noted that the sector had "achieved a baseline standard" since new regulations were introduced back in 2010 to provide basic protection for students and raise the quality of schools here, although she admitted that there was still a lot of work to be done.

It was also a busy time for those at the Singapore Association for Private Education (Sape), which marked its first full year of operations in July.

The industry body – the second here after the Association of Private Schools and Colleges Singapore – saw nine more members join its ranks, taking the total to 32.

Sape's members may only be a



Growing market: In February, Essec Business School celebrated the groundbreaking of a new \$40 million Asia-Pacific campus at Nepal Hill in one-north (left), while the SIM Group will complete the second and final phase of its \$300 million Clementi campus expansion next year. FILE PHOTOS



fraction of the 300-plus private education institutions (PEIs) registered here, but they collectively account for more than half of all the students enrolled.

"You could say that it was a quiet year for private education. But that is a good sign too, it means that there were no major scandals to talk about and many of our members have been doing quite well this year," said Sape's founding president, Lee Kwok Cheong, in an interview with *The Business Times*.

Mr Lee, who is also chief executive of Singapore Institute of Management Global Education (SIM GE), added that many students, both locals and foreigners, now feel more comfortable about taking the private education route.

"CPE has put in a good framework. We see that students are more confident in Singapore, people tend to have that trust now that a government agency (CPE) is overseeing things," Mr Lee says.

When asked what the future holds for the private education sector, he says that the biggest challenge is to ensure it maintains its relevance and attractiveness in the eyes of students and parents for the long haul.

This is especially given how more students will get to go to a publicly funded university in the coming years, now that there are six local universities after the government declared the entry of the Singapore Institute of Technology and SIM University (UniSIM) into the mix.

The first four are the National University of Singapore, the Nanyang Technological University, the Singapore Management University and the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

As things stand, the goal is to have 40 per cent of each student cohort make it to a publicly funded university by 2020, an increase of about 3,000 places that will take the total to 16,000.

Together with an expected in-

crease to about 10 per cent of the cohort receiving degree education through publicly funded part-time places by 2020, as many as half of each cohort could receive a government-subsidised degree education.

The past year was also significant as some major schools made further inroads into Singapore by expanding their physical presence here.

In November, IMD, a business school specialising in executive education, opened its new offices in Singapore, the first time it has established a site outside of its base in Lausanne, Switzerland.

In February, Essec Business School celebrated the groundbreaking of a new \$40 million Asia-Pacific campus at Nepal Hill in one-north. The five-storey facility is on track to be ready by the end of 2014.

"We have made the strategic decision to establish this new campus, and at the same time to develop our Beijing and Tokyo offices, thus expanding our international presence,"

said Essec Asia-Pacific dean Herve Mathe.

Essec, which currently conducts lessons out of its premises at the National Library Building at Victoria Street, also wants to use its new campus to further tap the growing executive education market.

The attitudes towards executive education here are changing, notes Essec Asia-Pacific teaching professor Cedomir Nestorovic.

"Executive education used to be a playground for companies which decide what programmes were useful and who was going to attend them. This is because companies used to support the cost of these programmes," he says.

"We have recently observed an increasing number of self-supporting participants joining the programmes, probably with the aim of changing their job or company but not stopping work at the same time," he adds.

Then there are other equally ambitious private education providers like

the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS), which in September broke ground on a RM300 million (S\$116.6 million) campus in Johor's Iskandar region.

The sprawling facility is nearly five times the size of its Singapore campus and the first phase is expected to open by 2015, with the entire project to be completed by 2023. MDIS Malaysia follows in the footsteps of Singapore's Raffles Education Corp, which is also developing a RM200 million campus at Iskandar's EduCity zone.

Looking ahead to 2014, Sape chief Mr Lee says he is looking forward to celebrating the 50th anniversary of the SIM Group, as well as the completion of the second and final phase of its \$300 million Clementi campus expansion next year.

"As far as SIM GE is concerned, we also feel that we are ready to go beyond Singapore in the coming years. There is much demand in the region for us to tap on, and we want to seize that potential," he says.