ST INTERVIEW

There are many paths to the top

NUS’ new president gives his assurance on fair and objective admissions

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Prof Tan expects that with the economic downturn next year, more Singaporeans will be counting on a cheaper university education locally. He gives the assurance that NUS will continue with its practice of interviewing students with borderline grades so that their other achievements can be considered. ST PHOTO: ALAN LIM
From The Straits Times, pA8
Date: 10 December 2008

The hot button issue of university places going to foreigners surfaced earlier this year, with a surge in applications to the local universities from 55,893 last year to 58,606 this year. It provoked debate on whether Singapore should reserve its limited education resources for its own population. Of the 14,700 places at NUS, Singapore Management University (SMU) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), one-fifth, or up to 2,940, of places went to foreign students.

During the interview at his Kent Ridge office, the soft-spoken Prof Tan, who studied medicine at NUS from 1977 to 1983, stresses: "Singaporeans come first - first in admissions and first in financial aid."

The admission bar is set way higher for foreigners.

"When accepting foreign students with international A-level qualifications, NUS demands no less than four As," he says.

"Many of them are extremely bright and bring with them special talents and different cultural perspectives."

Interviews take up a huge amount of time and manpower resources, but we will continue this rigorous process," he says.

"During the interviews, the panel members score candidates separately, so that one does not influence the other.

"Every student we admit we must be sure is deserving of a place over another."

But he maintains that rising aspirations of young Singaporeans cannot be met by simply increasing the number of university places.

"Universities cannot be expanded or new ones set up overnight. Not if they are great education institutions that will provide a good university education."

In some countries, expanding university places too quickly to meet demand has not resulted in high-paying jobs for graduates.

"The key to a quality university, he says, is building a first-rate faculty. But it takes time to persuade top-notch professors to come here."

He brings up Professor Artur Eker, 47, one of the world’s leading authorities in quantum information science. NUS started courting the Oxford University professor in the late 1990s when it invited him to spend a few months a year at Kent Ridge as a visiting professor.

It was a coup for the university when he joined in 2002. He has since drawn outstanding physicists from around the world to collaborate on research here.

"He cites the complaints about the university admission system here being "unforgivingly selective". That was how one American professor described it in a Forum Pajat lecture, citing many who fail to win a place locally but are accepted by reputable universities overseas."

Prof Tan admits it is not a perfect system, but says the admission system is "fairer" today that it takes into account students’ other qualities and achievements.

"It’s not just based on a snapshot of a student - his A-level results."

He recalls that when he applied for a seat in the NUS medical faculty in 1977, it was a shoo-in. His string of four As was all he needed. "I don’t remember having to go for an interview. Admission was then based solely on results."

But today, broader criteria are applied to admit students to popular faculties like law and medicine, such as their achievements in sports, the arts or community service. This also applies to the discretionary admission scheme.

He says: "We are not just looking for achievements but what they tell us about an individual. For someone to excel as a sportsman, you must have a certain level of motivation and ability to focus. We are looking for true passion, an interest in the community and people, and an ability to work with others."

He is aware that many students do community service just to embellish their co-curricular activities record.

But that is where the interview comes in.

"If a student hoping to study medicine comes in quoting the number of hours he put in helping out at a hospice, we may ask him to name a patient he remembers, what he learnt from the patient, what he learnt about being a doctor," explains Prof Tan, who was dean of medicine from 1997 to 2000.

"From the answers, you know if a student did the community service for the right reasons and gained something from it."

But even those who set out to make their CVs look good may have benefited from the community service.

"They may realise that they do have an empathy for people," he says. "Or a student who had always wanted to study medicine may discover she is queasy at the sight of blood."

Still, of the thousands who apply to enter NUS each year, there will be many who will not obtain a place in any course. For them, Prof Tan has this piece of advice: "There are many ways to discover where one’s interests and aptitude lie and to reach that goal."

NUS has numerous examples of postgraduate students who arrived via a different route, such as master of nursing student Yap Sui Foon, 35.

She started her nursing career at Alexandra Hospital and became interested in critical care nursing. To get into the field, she took up a diploma in nursing at Nanyang Polytechnic, followed by a Sydney University nursing degree at the Singapore Institute of Management and then back to NYT for an advanced diploma in critical care nursing, before enrolling in the masters programme at NUS.

He also points out the multiple pathways that the Education Ministry has created for students to advance. For example, polytechnic graduates who want to pursue a specialised degree now have the option of going to top schools, such as Wheelock College (known for preschool education) and Newcastle University (for naval architecture), which have set up here to offer degree courses.

"With the new economy, education becomes a life-long process, where a person goes back to university to reskill and upgrade themselves constantly. A student may be better off going from poly to work, before coming to NUS for a degree. "Parents and students must not think there is only one set route. There are many paths to the top."
ON HIS PREDECESSOR PROF SHIH CHOON FONG

“When I was Provost, I applied what I called the ‘shih principle’. It states that an A, C, C is better than a B, B, B. The idea is that it is better to be an ‘A’ in something, than to be above average all round. I think this has helped our faculty focus on the area in which they can best contribute and excel.”

ON MAKING BOLD STROKES

“At a Kong, Chinese landscape painters like myself know that...there is a great temptation to play it safe, to make incremental, timid strokes for fear of spoiling the painting. Such an approach usually fails. You often end up with a piece of art which is commonplace, which has fallen short of what it could have become. The test for the painter, therefore, is to continue to be bold in developing the painting, while planting each new stroke firmly and strategically.”

HOW TO BUILD A GREAT UNIVERSITY

“For me the answer is simple. It’s all about people – being single-minded about developing, retaining and recruiting top quality people, and creating a culture that brings out the best in them.”

Leading role during Sars crisis

PROFESSOR TAN CHÖRH CHUAN, 49, took over as president of the National University of Singapore (NUS) this month.

He served as NUS’sProvost and deputy president from 2004, before being made senior deputy president last year, where he took charge of the university’s strategic plans and its budgets.

A kidney specialist, he joined NUS as a lecturer in the Department of Medicine in 1987 and became the university’s youngest dean at the age of 38 in 1997.

He also served as director of medical services at the Ministry of Health from 2000 to 2004.

Prof Tan received the Public Service Star award in 2003 for his role in leading the public health response to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) crisis in Singapore.

New institute to tackle global and Asian issues

BY 2010, a new research institute will be set up at the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Kent Ridge campus.

Called the NUS Global Asia Institute, it will bring together the best minds to work on issues that impact on Asia – from the environment to the economy.

The institute, a brainchild of NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan, will be key to his plan to continue building NUS into a leading global university, but one that is centred on Asia.

Details are still being worked out by a task force that has been set up, but Professor Tan said the research taken on by the institute will be “large-scale issues important globally as well as in Asia”.

“It will conduct research that will deal with complex and interlinked questions, often beyond the scope of existing research centres,” he added.

Prof Tan, who took over the helm of the 103-year-old university this month, explained why he thought it was important for NUS to focus on Asia.

“Globally, Asia’s dramatic rise means it is important that Asia be a future leader. It is also where humanity will face some of its greatest challenges such as environmental degradati

on, ageing and burden of chronic diseases. There is a huge unmet need for better research and scholarship to understand critical issues within Asia and to find suitable solutions.”

By building expertise on Asia, he hopes his alma mater can create its own distinctiveness – “to differentiate itself in an intensely competitive global higher education landscape”.

Singapore and NUS, he said, both have certain advantages.

“We are international, English-speaking and can address issues of importance to India, China and South-east Asia. We can also leverage on Singapore’s dynamism, reputation and innovative public policies,” he said.

To staff the institute, NUS will continue to recruit top-flight faculty in strategic areas with special expertise in relation to India, China, South-east Asia and other parts of Asia.

Right now, out of the 2,100 professors, 50 per cent are from overseas. He envisu

es an aim for NUS to become the “preferred partner for scholars and industry seeking partnerships in Asia”.

He also has a plan to help his faculty and NUS reach greater heights.

The “New Research Horizons Award” will be set up to fund faculty with unconventional research ideas which have the potential to make exciting breakthroughs.

“The goal is to support faculty whose research can help define thinking in the field, whose work can open up new lines of inquiry,” he said, citing the example of German Nobel prize winner Dr Harald zur Hausen, who identified the human papilloma-ma viruses that cause cervical cancer.

“Very few people believed that a virus could be the cause of cancer of the cervix. But this did not deter Dr zur Hausen who proved that this was indeed the case.”

What is needed is encouragement and recognition of novel research ideas, particularly when “these go against accepted thinking”, he said.