

Don't pay too much attention to uni rankings, say experts

Advisory panel calls for other ways to assess S'pore universities based on their main missions

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

Do not put too much weight on university rankings, which are at best a crude gauge for quality and can overlook an institution's true strengths.

This was the consensus of a panel of experts from the likes of Imperial College London and Cambridge University, after a three-day meeting to advise the Education Ministry and universities here.

"We need a much more varied approach," Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said yesterday at the end of the meeting of the International Academic Advisory Panel, which he sat in on.

Highlighting how each of Singapore's six autonomous universities has its own focus, and social and economic mission, he added: "Perhaps we need to have different kinds of measurements, different kinds of matrices, that can gauge the success and achievements of each of our universities."

The panel, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and is now in its 11th edition, meets every few years. The heads of Singapore's six autonomous universities were also present during the meetings.

This year, panel members discussed three key topics: The value of a degree, lifelong learning and



Members of the International Academic Advisory Panel observing a demonstration of Folo Fleet, a semi-autonomous smart mobility device convoy system, at NTU on Wednesday, as part of their three-day meeting. Key topics discussed were the value of a degree, lifelong learning and impactful research. ST PHOTO: SYAMIL SAPARI

impactful research.

Singapore's universities have been doing well in rankings. For instance, in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings released earlier this month, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University came in 11th and 12th, respectively, with NUS emerging as Asia's top university.

Professor Stephen Toope, vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, which came in sixth in the latest QS list, said one key message was to not pay too much attention to global rankings, and instead find ways to assess universities based on their main missions.

"It is especially important here in Singapore. It is a small country with only a limited number of universi-

ties," he said, adding that different universities have different roles. "Rankings tend to pull everyone back to a mean and make it seem as if there is only one model of university that is right. I think that is a fundamental misconception."

Mr Ong said there was strong agreement within the panel that Singapore's efforts in moving towards experiential learning, such as internships and overseas exposure, are on the right track.

Singapore Management University provost Lily Kong said: "It is not about provision of knowledge because that is available everywhere. It is about throwing students into the real world, getting hands and feet dirty, and learning that way."

The university leaders also dis-

cussed their role in supporting adult learners, with panel members agreeing that Singapore is ahead of other countries in its push for lifelong learning.

The national movement SkillsFuture has, in the past few years, started a push to encourage people to rethink learning, jobs and skills through work-study programmes and initiatives to draw university alumni back to school, for instance.

One recommendation is to help working adults better assess the quality of courses available and to curate suitable learning options for them.

Prof Kong said: "We are still thinking through, working through the different pedagogies that are needed for different types of learners - the experienced worker ver-

sus the fresh-faced undergraduate. "We are thinking through the different business models that universities have to adopt and adapt in the face of these changes."

Professor Henrik Wegener, rector of Denmark's University of Copenhagen and one of 11 overseas representatives on the panel, said that with the wave of digital disruptions, even university graduates are at risk of losing their jobs.

"Universities have a very important role to play there which they have not played before. Our faculty is not used to teaching adult learners. Our institutions' offerings are not adapted to the needs of adult learners... so there is a lot of work to do."

ateng@sph.com.sg

MEASURING SUCCESS

Perhaps we need to have different kinds of measurements, different kinds of matrices, that can gauge the success and achievements of each of our universities.



EDUCATION MINISTER ONG YE KUNG, on current university rankings as a gauge to measure the institutions.