

# The Straits Times

Review - Others

## **Getting an edge in vying for top brains**

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EVERY January, the American Economic Association (AEA) and the American Finance Association (AFA) hold their annual conferences. Scholars from all over the world converge to debate research findings and discuss new ideas.

The annual AEA/AFA meetings are also the setting for the doctoral 'job market', where prospective PhDs meet prospective employers. Less visible than the panel of Nobel prize winners that was convened at the meeting but more remarkable was the presence of 19 Chinese academic institutions to recruit new faculty members. Last year, just six Chinese institutions attended the job market.

Economic globalisation is driven by falling barriers to trade and the movement of capital and people, de-regulation and technology. The very same forces also drive globalisation in higher education. Universities play two roles: create knowledge and train people. In both roles, faculty is key. Smart research and smart teaching are possible only with smart people.

As the Singapore Government has repeatedly emphasised, our future growth is constrained by a limited talent pool. Faced with that limitation, our universities have recruited foreigners aggressively. But, with globalisation, the competition for scholars is increasing.

Historically, our universities have been able to recruit many Chinese and Indian scholars. With their billion plus populations, China and India have among the world's largest talent pools.

Until recently, Chinese universities were shackled by communism. Indian universities continue to be held back by the legacy of Nehru-style socialism. So China and India have been major exporters of talent. From 1998 to 2007, a total of 1.2 million Chinese left to study overseas; only 26 per cent returned to China.

As a result of rapid economic growth in China and India, two new trends are emerging in the academic job market. First, fewer Chinese and many fewer Indians are leaving for doctoral programmes overseas. Careers in business

and the professions at home have become much more attractive.

The second trend is that relatively more Chinese who have completed their PhDs and even those who have established academic careers in the United States are returning home. Their home institutions are improving quickly, albeit in fits and starts.

Despite its limitations, the Times Higher Educational Supplement ranking of universities provides a useful benchmark. The top three ranked Chinese universities in the world are Beijing (50th), Qinghua (56th) and Fudan (113th). By contrast, the top-ranked Indian institution is the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi (154th).

For the time being, Singapore is comfortably ahead, with National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University ranked 30th and 77th respectively (Singapore Management University is not ranked). One of my Japanese friends told me that their top institution - Tokyo University - keeps a systematic watch on only two competitors in Asia. One of them is NUS.

The other, however, is Beijing University - and therein lies the challenge for Singapore. As their funding increases, Chinese academic institutions are rapidly becoming more attractive to graduating PhDs and mid-career academics.

The Chinese universities are also quickly absorbing the best practices of academic management. An example: The number of interview teams they have fielded at AEA/AFA meetings has more than trebled in just two years.

So how can Singapore universities compete? Back to the Times' rankings. NUS' lowest score was 39 for faculty-student ratio (far lower than its next lowest score of 75 for research citations per faculty member). NTU's scores in these departments were 47 and 38 respectively.

Clearly, we must improve faculty-student ratios. The current economic crisis presents a golden opportunity. As US universities - both private and state - cut back or even freeze recruitment, we should seize the opening to increase our recruitment. The key to a great university is great people, more so than campuses, buildings or equipment.

The presence of Chinese institutions at the AEA/AFA conference shows that they understand this and are thus seizing the opportunities for recruitment. How can we compete against China?

To begin with, we must differentiate ourselves in ways that they cannot match. An important area we can differentiate ourselves is by providing a better academic environment - specifically, by ensuring shared governance and maintaining academic freedom: Academic freedom means that the faculty has exclusive responsibility for the intellectual content of research and teaching. Shared governance means that the management and faculty share

responsibility for strategy and administration.

One important area of shared governance is the promotion and tenure system: Led by former provost Chong Chi Tat, NUS established a rigorous promotion and tenure system. By assuring scholars that only the best would advance, and that assessment is transparent and rigorous, the university can attract the best.

China can shower millions of dollars on its top scholars; it can build state-of-the-art laboratories; it can buy millions of books. However, by the very nature of its political system, China cannot credibly offer shared governance.

The real boss in a Chinese university is its party secretary. He or she might have few or no relevant academic credentials. The highest qualification of the party secretary at a top Chinese business school was a Master in Nuclear Engineering!

Likewise, China cannot guarantee academic freedom, even in rather simple ways like providing access to the Internet (China must be one of the few countries in the world to distinguish between domestic and international Internet). The easiest way to fix your worst enemy in China is to send him an e-mail with the words 'falungong'. The e-mail would be blocked and your enemy would get the attention of the police.

Shared governance and academic freedom are essential. They make the difference between a teaching institution and a research-intensive university. They are the key to Singapore's academic institutions maintaining a sustained advantage in the globalised education market.

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