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Dean's List – Sir Richard Sykes

S'pore should have more choices in tertiary education, not just more graduates

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CHAIRMAN of Singapore's Biomedical Sciences International Advisory Council since 2000 and an Honorary Citizen for the past four years, Sir Richard Sykes must know a thing or two about what makes the Republic tick.

Which is why you would naturally pay attention when the 65-year-old rector of Imperial College warned Singapore against following his country's "big mistake", when this newspaper asked him for advice that he would give Singapore as it looks to expand its tertiary sector.

The policymakers have an eye on upping the proportion of students receiving subsidized university education from 23.5 per cent to 30 per cent by 2015.

But Sir Richard said: "The big mistake we made in the United Kingdom ... we came up with a magic figure of 50 per cent. Where did that come from? Nobody knows. That's a mistake Singapore shouldn't make."

The former Glaxo-SmithKline chairman was sharing his views with TODAY while here to give a talk recently.

He believes Singapore's approach in revamping its primary, secondary and pre-university education landscape, in which new academic routes are being opened up, would also serve the tertiary education scene well.

Said Sir Richard: "What you need in tertiary education is choice. You need different kinds of education because everybody does not fit into the pattern of going to a university."

Citing the American example, he added: "From a community college, you can go to Harvard. That's what you've got to do in Singapore – make sure there are no barriers. You can progress at a fast pace, a slow pace, go in this direction, that direction."

In recent months, public discussions have been rife about the shape and form of Singapore's fourth, and possibly fifth university, with government officials throwing up suggestions up suggestions such as an allied healthcare university and a liberal arts college.

The fundamental question for policymakers here, said Richard, is: “Where are the gaps?”

Pointing out that the Republic’s education landscape is well endowed in many fields, he believes it would be sooner, rather than later, that the Republic would witness the setting up of its first liberal arts college.

Adding that it was an option “that has to be considered seriously”, he said: “It would have to start small and develop. But I do think Singapore is going to come to terms with that at some stage.”

Having his fair share of contact with Singaporean students at Imperial College, Sir Richard is impressed by their caliber and hardworking ethos – but thinks they work too hard.

He said: “They come with determination, wanting to learn and study. If there’s one criticism, they do it too hard.”

While lamenting the aloofness of most English students – “there are all sorts of reasons for that” – Sir Richard wishes overseas Singaporean students would spend less time with their books.

“One of the greatest advantages of university education is to take the whole education into account – not just the subject you are studying, but the environment in which you live in and the student activities that go on,” he said.

Another piece of advice he used to give Singaporean students on GlaxoSmithKline scholarships is: It’s better to get your first degree in the UK.

Giving his take on the perennial comparisons between the UK and United States tertiary education scene, he said: “If you go to a good university in the UK, you get a very good grounding in that subject.”

“Okay, you might get a broader education in the US, but at some point in time, you’ve got to get the fundamentals of your subject. Which then makes it easier for you to move in to do research work as a postgraduate ... Then, for the second degree, it would be such a good opportunity if you could go to the US.”