

PM's challenge to local varsities: Attract top brains

The call comes a day after DPM Tan urged NUS to aim for the global Top 10

UNIVERSITIES worldwide are in a global war for talent, and Singapore's must not lose out, the Prime Minister said last night.

Next year, they will be given more autonomy, so they can fight the battle for students and academic talent.

"Universities are in an intense contest to attract the best and brightest. Such competition, moreover, is not just local or regional. It

is global, and fiercely so," Mr Lee Hsien Loong said.

"The best universities trawl for the best faculty, students, researchers and partners for collaboration, in a global catchment.

"The best students apply to all the top universities in the world in their chosen discipline, especially at post-graduate level."

As Mr Lee, an alumnus of Cambridge and Harvard Universities, noted, there are 600,000 international students in America alone.

Universities in Asia are emulating best practices from successful United States universities, and fast catching up. In China, there are 100,000 international students.

The message about the contest for talent resonated with Dr Martha Piper, president of University of British Columbia in Vancouver, who said: "Every university is looking for the best brains."

Mr Lee's challenge to local universities comes just a day after Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan urged the National University of Singapore to aim to be among the Top 10 in the world.

These calls also come amid changes in Singapore's university sector. More overseas campuses are setting up here, while next year, NUS and the Nanyang Technological University will become autonomous and incorporated as

private not-for-profit companies.

This will be the same set-up as Singapore Management University, the youngest university here, whose autonomous status has allowed for more creative experimentation.

The hope is that the change in status will spark a mindset change among the leadership, staff, students and alumni, and "encourage them to take greater ownership of their institutions," said Mr Lee.

The devolution follows a worldwide trend. Japan, Denmark, and Finland are all reforming their universities.

Germany, too, has an initiative to develop 10 top-class universities,



NUS CENTURY: PM Lee unveiling a sculpture commemorating NUS' Centennial celebration.

he told a group of 400 university presidents and staff who attended a dinner last night.

About 50 university heads are in Singapore for a round-table meeting of the Association of American Universities and the Association of Pacific Rim Universities.

Mr Lee said that Singapore has broadened access to university education while maintaining high standards. By 2010, Singaporean universities will offer places for up to a quarter of each cohort, while probably a quarter will go to private universities in Singapore or universities abroad.

With the growing numbers of international students, universities play a big role in helping countries understand each other, he said. For example, tens of thousands of Chinese students who studied in the US are now back in China, in middle-management.

When this generation is in charge, "it'll be a different China," said Mr Lee.

Earlier yesterday, the university heads also had a dialogue with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew. The meetings coincide with NUS' centennial celebrations, which get underway this evening.

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