Private schools’ body for major shake-up in sector

Proposal to ensure sustainability could trim schools’ numbers by half

Derrick A Paulo
derrick@newstoday.com.sg

A PROPOSAL by the Association of Private Schools (APS) is set to shake up the private education sector here, possibly trimming the more than 300 private schools now jostling for a piece of the foreign students pie to half the number.

Under the proposal, the association wants private education organisations (PEO) to integrate their operations under five to 10 hubs to ensure the sustainability of their operations.

This would mean smaller schools coming under the wing of what APS president Andrew Chua describes as “lead schools”, those that are more established and have more resources.

“What we are proposing is an amalgamation of the various schools under one roof and under one name,” he told TODAY.

Through clustering, smaller schools can leverage on economies of scale by tapping a common pool of lecturers and sharing facilities such as student hostels, he said.

The association changed its constitution recently so that the clusters would consist of not only private schools but also tuition and training centres and education support services such as student hostels and publishers.

Each cluster would consist of between five,000 and 10,000 students and generate recruitment revenues of between $50 million and $100 million.

Mr Chua says he has broached the idea to some government agencies, which he said were “in principle, very supportive”.

APS is also hoping to get the authorities to provide infrastructural support such as leasing of old school buildings to incentivise private schools to form these clusters.

“The agencies’ concern is how to prevent PEO clusters from becoming Ali Baba operations, where smaller schools use the lead schools as cover,” he said.

One way to guard against that, he believes, is to get lead schools to take legal responsibility for the schools within their cluster by monitoring their “quality assurance processes”.

The outcome would be to streamline the rules and regulations within each cluster. Student applications could then be centralised through the lead school, he added.

However, some schools were not convinced the idea would work.

Executive vice-president of Raffles Campus Roland Ng commented: “If smaller schools can’t follow the lead school, what is going to happen? And if they could follow such processes, they wouldn’t be small in the first place.”

Marketing Institute of Singapore senior manager Florence Siow thinks it may be good if the schools in a cluster are running different programmes, as they would then not compete directly with each other.

“But independence is very important to private schools. It’s not only about running schools operationally. There are financial issues, budgets to handle. Clusters could be cumbersome,” she pointed out.

But Mr Chua thinks the cluster concept could prove to be a lifeline for smaller schools, which are struggling with cash-flow problems after measures were introduced recently for the private education market.

 Besides provision of the SQC status, which gives schools privileges such as waiver of security deposits, the authorities require schools to deposit students’ fees into a separate bank account. The money will be released in instalments until a student finishes his studies.

 When the CaseTrust quality seal comes into full force in September, schools that are unable to attain it will not be allowed to recruit international students.

Mr Chua believes that PEO clustering would help to alleviate some of the challenges facing the industry. At the same time, he admitted that the concept could hasten the casualty count. “We’ll probably be left with about 100-odd PEOs,” he said.

If smaller schools can’t follow the lead school, what is going to happen? And if they could follow such processes, they wouldn’t be small in the first place.

- Executive vice-president of Raffles Campus Roland Ng

What we are proposing is an amalgamation of the various schools under one roof and under one name.

- A PS president Andrew Chua (above)

MPs to raise concerns

Several MPs will be raising their concerns on the protection of young children from Internet vices when Parliament sits on Monday.

Madam Cynthia Phua (Aljunied GRC) wants to know how the Government can protect these children from offers of sex on the Internet.

Dr Amy Khor (Hong Kah GRC) asks if there can be stiffer penalties on those who solicit sex from youth online, while nominated MP Eunice Olisen questions if the Government is aware of Singaporeans who go overseas to engage in sex with minors.

Other questions tabled deal with the transport fare hike, details of the ElderShield scheme and an update on the security situation.

Parliament will sit on Monday at 1.30pm.

MM Lee in Shanghai

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew will be in Shanghai on Saturday for a four-day visit.

There to address Bain and Company’s global partner meeting, he will also be conferred an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree by Fudan University at the Shanghai Forum.

During his visit, he will meet Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Jianguu. Mr Lee will be accompanied by his wife.

SM Goh in Middle East

Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong is making another working visit to the Middle East from May 14 to 17.

Mr Goh will meet with members of the Abu Dhabi and Dubai royal families, ministers and business leaders.

Besides attending events hosted by two Singapore companies that have secured business projects in the UAE, he will also attend the first anniversary dinner of the Singapore Business Council in Dubai as the guest of honour.

From May 17 to 18, he will be in Jordan to participate in the Petra Conference for Nobel Laureates at the invitation of King Abdullah II.

IBN seeks venture capitalists for a molecular diagnostics firm

The Institute of Bioengineering and Nanotechnology (IBN) is looking for venture capitalists for a yet-to-be-named company that will deal in molecular diagnostics.

The IBN’s executive director Prof Jackie Ying revealed the spin-off at the institute’s official opening yesterday — exactly one year after it moved into the Biopolis.

Said Prof Ying: “At IBN, we believe in running fast and working together.”

The IBN is the first institute in the world to marry bioengineering and nanotechnology. Starting out with only 20 staff members, it now has 150 staff and PhD students.

Last year, it filed more than 40 patents and has published more than 140 journal articles to-date.

Its parent organisation, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research Institute (A*Star), is also on the way to licensing another four technologies, making a total of five commercialisations to date.

The IBN’s R&D race is part of Singapore’s efforts to build up research capabilities in the life sciences arena.

At the opening yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister Dr Tony Tan underscored the importance of research and innovation, especially with the emergence of China and India.

Marking the urgency is the fact that even developed countries in the European Union are instituting fundamental changes to their economies.

Dr Tan chairs the Ministerial Committee on Research that aims to identify new growth areas for Singapore.

He has been visiting various countries to study their models and the committee will submit its recommendations to the Cabinet by mid-year.

As part of the effort, the IBN has a youth research programme targeted at students and teachers at all levels.

“It is our dream that one of us at IBN will one day win the Nobel Prize to make Singapore proud and to realise the investment the people have placed on us,” said Prof Ying. “Tan Hui Long