

THE ST INTERVIEW

Too many schools spoil the industry

SIM CEO hopes to see just 10 major players in private education sector



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IF MR Lee Kwok Cheong had his way, the cleanup of the private education sector would have been even more rigorous than it has been.

That is quite something when you consider that, to date, only 62 of the 1,000 private schools here have met the stringent new registration requirements that have been set down for them.

And of them, only 13 have so far qualified for the higher-level Edutrust mark that allows them to enrol foreign students.

But, according to the chief executive officer of the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM), Singapore's largest private school and one of those to win the Edutrust mark, 13 is still "three too many".

"Ideally, if we want a healthy, thriving high-quality private education sector, only 10 big players should remain," he says.

The Government passed stricter laws governing schools late last year as part of an industry crackdown designed to raise standards in a sector plagued by complaints and hit by sudden school closures.

Under the new regime, private schools registering with the overseeing Council for Private Education (CPE) must meet tougher requirements in a number of areas, including recognition of courses and teachers' qualifications.

If they fail to meet the new standards by June next year, they will be ordered to close down.

Those who want the Edutrust mark must meet even higher standards, including having independent academic and examination boards; having to disclose their finances, teachers and facilities; and ensuring that foreign institution links are up to par.

Before the new laws came into place, some 300 of the 1,000 schools here were taking in foreign students. Now industry veterans expect this number will be ruthlessly whittled down to under 50.

The 55-year-old Mr Lee, who was brought in from the IT industry to run the global education arm of SIM, has nothing but praise for the shake-up.

"It is long overdue. Previously, just about anybody could rent a shop space, hire a couple of teachers with minimum qualifications and set up a school. The barrier was set really low," he laments.

"As a result, we had some fly-by-night operators who came in just to make a quick buck without any concern for the welfare of students."

He predicts that the industry bloodletting will continue over the next year.

"There will be shutdowns and mergers. It will be good if in the end, it is whittled down to 10 big players and a variety of niche institutions such as language schools and culinary arts schools. Of course, I see SIM being one of the big 10," he says, quick to declare his vested interest.

Setting up and running a proper private school is tough – and should have appropriately rigorous benchmarks. He points out that it requires huge investment – in land, facilities and good teachers – and signing up the right university partners.

"When you have too many small players without the know-how and resources, you are going to have a weak industry and it is not going to be good for Singapore in the long run," he adds.

The former decade-long head of SingTel subsidiary National Computer Systems draws a parallel to the shake-up of the personal computer industry.

"When the PC first came to the market, there were 1,000 to 2,000 PC manufacturers. But after five to 10 years, it was down to maybe five big ones. But these are all strong, innovative companies that have added to the vibrancy of the whole industry."

He fully supports the new laws that impose harsh penalties on wayward operators. Those who offer fake degrees or leave students in the lurch will face tougher penalties, including hefty fines and even jail.

In his five years at SIM, Mr Lee has seen his fair share of private school scandals – including that involving Brookes Business School which was found to be selling fake degrees – so he thinks the full force of the authorities should be brought to bear on culprits.

"If some serious crimes have been committed they must be dealt with, with all the force of the law."

He mourns the fact that every time a scandal blows up, all other schools are tarred with the same brush. So he urges the CPE to not just come up with sticks, but also carrots to reward the "do-gooders". By this, he means the established players, the ones who are serious about providing a good, high-quality education for both foreigners and Singaporeans.

"The current focus is on consumer protection and taking out the weeds. That's all very good, but education cannot be just about weeding out the bad players and protecting the students. CPE should work with the industry to support, develop and promote the good players."

"It's like farming. You get rid of the weeds, then you focus on the crops you want to grow. See what more you can do to help them thrive."

The good schools, he suggests, can be supported and promoted by CPE via its promotion and student recruitment efforts. They can also be given training, grants and even tax breaks.

For example, he asks whether schools that achieve a high credit rating can be spared from buying insurance for their local students.

SIM, he reveals, had recently spent over \$1 million buying fee protection for its 3,000 foreign and 11,000 local



Now that basic regulatory guidelines have been put in place, SIM chief executive Lee Kwok Cheong is in favour of tweaking the rules so that they adapt to the variety of institutions here. ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

Flunked exams, still ended up in MIT

MR LEE Kwok Cheong, 55, is chief executive officer of the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM).

Born and raised in Hong Kong, the eldest of six children started helping out in the family-run provision shop at eight. He went to primary school two years earlier than other children because of a shortage of day-care services and, as a result, flunked Hong Kong's equivalent of the Primary School Leaving Examination and had to repeat his exams.

But his faltering first steps in education did not stop him from excelling in his studies later. In 1973, he won a place at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to pursue a double degree in management and computer science. He supported himself by working three jobs.

In 1983, Mr Lee, then a high-flying IT consultant in Hong Kong, was headhunted to join the National Computer Board here, later known as NCS. He uprooted his family and became a Singapore citizen in 1986.

During his decade at NCS, Mr Lee transformed it into a regional IT and communications engineering services powerhouse with subsidiaries in eight countries. While he was there, NCS grew its revenue from \$138 million in

1997 to \$668 million in 2005.

He has also served as the president of the Singapore Computer Society, chairman of the National InfoComm Competency Council and member of the iN2015 Steering Committee – iN2015 is the Government's latest 10-year IT masterplan.

Although he admits to being known as the "IT guy", education has always been close to his heart. That is why, in 2005, he agreed to head the global education arm of SIM that is tasked with running degree programmes in partnership with overseas universities.

Mr Lee was an Adjunct Associate Professor at Nanyang Technological University's business school from 1998 to 2002, and also sat on the boards of Nanyang Polytechnic and the Institute of Technical Education.

Because of his own childhood experience, he believes in educational opportunities for everyone, regardless of their learning pace: "I was a late bloomer. Had I been written off when I didn't do well in my exams the first round, my life would have been very different."

Mr Lee and his Japanese wife Sachiko, a housewife, have two sons and a daughter, all in their 20s.

full-time students. Money, he ventures, which could be better spent on providing scholarships for students.

Another carrot for the exemplary who self-impose rigorous standards, he says, could be to allow their foreign students to work part-time.

Currently, only those studying in government institutions and those classed as "institutes of higher learning", such as the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Insead, are allowed to work here.

In the past, when calls were made to extend the part-time work allowance to all foreign students, the authorities voiced concerns that some foreigners would come here with the express purpose of working rather than studying.

But Mr Lee points out that other top education destinations overseas have

dealt with similar issues, and have gone ahead to allow part-time work for foreign students.

As an undergraduate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the mid-70s, he too took on a variety of part-time jobs, including as a test-tube washer and janitor. "Besides the money, allowing foreign students to work here would help them to integrate better."

"Students will also be able to gauge if they like living here and if there are opportunities here. After all, Singapore is in the education business to draw talent and skilled people."

Now that basic regulatory guidelines have been put in place, he is in favour of tweaking the rules so that they adapt to the variety of institutions here and do not become a "one-size-fits-all" regime.

"Can you imagine, SIM with 14,000 full-time students and 6,000 part-time students is subject to the same regulations as a hairdressing school that has 200 students?"

He would like the CPE to push the bigger private schools to provide more than just billable courses, so they supply "a whole educational experience".

SIM is attempting to do just that and encourages students to set up clubs and undertake projects. To date, it has 60 clubs run by students ranging from film and performing arts to an entrepreneurs' club. It also has a programme where students can opt for work-and-study stints abroad, in countries such as China, the United States and Britain.

"Social interaction is a very important part of education. You study, play together, you make good friends and you learn about each other. Why can't the private schools running degrees offer the whole educational experience, just like the public universities here?" he asks.

And, while academic quality is justifiably the new watchword, he thinks merely checking on the accreditation of degrees would be "setting the bar too low".

Schools should be encouraged to track academic outcomes, in a similar manner to the way SIM tracks the number of its first class honours and second upper honours graduates. He notes that of all the external centres around the world running University of London programmes, SIM has produced the most graduates with first class honours – 310 to date.

He acknowledges that the final proof of the pudding for any educational regime is in the employment prospects of its students. As SIM enrolls more full-time students, both local and foreign, it is looking at conducting graduate employment surveys similar to those conducted by public universities, polytechnics and institutes of technical education here.

He is all too aware of employers' preference for graduates from the public universities over those with overseas university degrees from the private schools.

But he is hopeful that the new tighter regime that has been introduced will begin to swing the pendulum towards private schools.

"I think that things are set to change, or should change, if the new regulations have bite and regain public trust in the private education sector."

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