NTU out to draw best researchers

They make the best teachers too, serving their students ‘fresh food’: NTU provost

By LEE U-WEN

He may not be a chef by training, but Bertil Andersson believes in serving his students at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) only the freshest food he can find – not that which comes from a factory.

It’s an analogy Prof Andersson, the university’s provost, uses when he explains why NTU should spare no effort in recruiting the world’s best researchers.

“The top researchers in the world are also the best teachers. They bring the latest in their respective field to the students. They give them fresh food, not tinned food. That’s why I say it’s so important for us to become a research-intensive university for the future,” he said.

A good university is not only about the bricks; it’s the brains,” he added.

The articulate Swedish scientist took on the provost’s job in April last year, becoming the second-in-command to NTU president Su Guaning. Before coming to Singapore, Prof Andersson was formerly CEO of the high-powered European Science Foundation, which champions research across the continent.

One question he gets asked most frequently by outsiders, however, is why he and other newly recruited professors chose NTU over other more established varsities around the world – a question that frustrates him no end.

“Why do the best students head to places like MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)? It’s not for the M, the I, or the T. It’s not about the brand name. They go because they know they are going to be taught in, say, chemistry, by the best chemistry researchers in the world.”

In fact, Prof Andersson goes so far as to suggest that NTU is more well known in other countries than here.

He recalled how, last November, NTU took out an advertisement in several journals, including Nature and Science, to hunt for 10 young scientists to come and do research at NTU. By the time applications closed, 400 PhD holders hailing from universities across the US, UK and Europe had sent in their CVs.

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“This is fantastic not just for us, but for the whole country,” he said. “That we have come under the radar of these young talents. You look back five, 10 years ago – they would have never considered coming to Singapore,” he said.

The 10 names will be announced later this year. Each will get up to $1 million to further their work over three years and be made assistant professors paid up to $160,000 a year.

In another major coup, out of a separate group of 10 young foreign scientists chosen under a similar scheme by the National Research Foundation, five of them ended up picking NTU as their base.

In the long run, said Prof Andersson, Singapore could well produce its fair share of Nobel Prize winners. “If you look at where Nobel Prizes are given out – Cambridge, Oxford, London, Zurich, Boston, New York, Southern California – these are where the best research is carried out. And these places are where the sexy companies want to be. It’s only natural that high-level research and top universities attract the best companies to grow the economy,” he said.

So why, then, is NTU perennially seen as the underdog university in Singapore? “Yes, it is, but unfairly so. Sometimes, one has to accept that, all over the world, perception changes slower than reality. But a lot of good things are happening here. And just last year, we were ranked 69th globally by The Times Higher Education Supplement.”

When asked to sum up his first full year in the hot seat at NTU, Prof Andersson pauses, sighs and then smiles, before saying: “It actually feels much longer than that. In order to do the job here, you need 26 hours a day, not 24. But it has been very rewarding; there is action here all the time.”