Coming soon: third medical school and uni town in Oxbridge mould

By MALMINDERJIT SINGH (SINGAPORE) Singapore will soon have a third medical school and an Oxbridge-style collegiate university town, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said during his National Day Rally speech last night.

Elaborating on the surprise topic of education in his speech, Mr Lee said that there are plans to start a new medical school at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Medical School and Duke-NUS Medical School.“This will create more spaces for Singaporeans who want to study medicine and also attract good international students,” Mr Lee said.

Mr Lee also provided an update on the NUS University Town, which will adopt a college system as in Cambridge and Oxford. Speaking fittingly at the University Cultural Centre in NUS, Mr Lee said that plans for the under-construction university town, which is due to launch its two residential colleges and the graduate residence in its initial phase in August 2011, are on track.

Mr Lee explained that universities in Singapore must aim to provide excellent local options for tertiary education and that while many Singaporeans continue to study in prestigious universities overseas, more should be done to enable them to read for their undergraduate degree locally.

He added that by spending their years in a top-class local university, Singaporeans would have established ties with their peer group here even if they may later venture overseas for a postgraduate programme.

Acknowledging that these higher-costing programmes will be expensive and will result in higher government expenditure on tertiary education, Mr Lee cautioned that university fees are likely to increase accordingly, even though they will continue to be heavily subsidised.

However, he reassured Singaporeans that all promising students will be able to attend these programmes regardless of their family circumstances through generous scholarships, bursaries and loans.

Mr Lee pointed out that the one source of university funding that should be built up is donations and endowments as this allows universities to launch new initiatives that benefit students, without relying too much on direct government funding, and fund students who need financial support.

He mentioned that all of the three public universities here – NUS, NTU and the Singapore Management University – have instigated the class gift and have built up their endowments.

To provide additional support to these endowments, Mr Lee announced that the government will commit close to $4 billion over 20 years to create a Singapore Universities Trust. He added that $2 billion of this trust will be set aside to ensure financial support through economic downturns.

To provide a boost to new projects here, Mr Lee said that the government will provide 3-to-1 matching to donations to endowments for a period of time while providing a 1.5-to-1 ratio for existing universities.

Mr Lee said that he hopes the public, particularly alumni, will respond and cited the examples of US Ivy League universities.

Mr Lee explained that unlike some of these other universities, universities here have a complex job of educating a broad range of students. “The top universities in the world admit only 0.5 per cent from their cohort,” he compared.

Mr Lee stated that by 2015, universities in Singapore will be on course to admit as much as 30 per cent of the cohort. At present, the admission rate of universities here stands at 26 per cent.

Besides universities, Mr Lee also announced changes to primary, secondary and polytechnic education in Singapore.

Besides universities, Mr Lee also announced changes to primary, secondary and polytechnic education in Singapore, particularly a “through-train” programme for students from the Normal (Academic) stream, who do well at the N-level examinations, to opt for a one-year foundation programme at the polytechnics, instead of doing the O-level examinations.