Joint Medical School a Win-Win Partnership for NTU and Imperial College London

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(Chinese article appeared in Lian He Zao Bao on 17 September 2010)

Photo caption: Imperial College London counted seven to eight Nobel laureates at one time during its heyday. This was more than that for The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the States.

In his National Day Rally Speech this year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the establishment of a new medical school — a tie-up between Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Imperial College London. This is a significant milestone both in the history of Singapore’s tertiary education as well as for medical education.

First and foremost, Singapore can now look forward to a second school offering undergraduate studies in medicine. For decades past since the colonial era, the NUS School of Medicine had been the only institution to groom the doctor profession in Singapore. Foreign players like Duke University and John Hopkins have since teamed up with Singapore to launch programmes here. These are however in the areas of graduate research or training which do not serve to directly augment our pool of doctors.

Secondly, the NTU-Imperial College medical school partnership is clearly a win-win situation for both sides. Over the last decade, Imperial College is consistently ranked high globally among the top universities and is among the top three British universities along with Cambridge and Oxford. Further, both Imperial College and NTU exemplify core competencies in engineering and science. Both are reputed centres of excellence with a shared heritage in nurturing technical professionals and scientists. Specifically, for over a century Imperial College has been firmly grounded in her founding mission of building up an elite engineering and science education to complement the literary and humanities centres at Cambridge and Oxford.

NTU’s collaboration with Imperial College would also effectively open the door to a range of collaborations across their disciplines. Education is an integral part of culture and Britain traditionally embodies that facet of western culture which values the relentless pursuit and advancement of knowledge as well as innovation. At Imperial College, this is reflected in their non-wavering commitment to vigorously develop the fundamental sciences or pure sciences such as Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and Basic Life Sciences. For a university with engineering course focus, it does not seem to make much sense to invest heavily in R&D for foundation sciences which appear to yield lower returns in the short term. Notwithstanding, Imperial College has never compromised on building a strong and rigorous foundation in science disciplines. This is precisely because its governing board subscribes to the belief that having a world class base in foundation sciences is vital as a prerequisite to building up a world class technological university and medical school.
Imperial College London boasts of impressive and solid credentials. It counted as many as seven to eight Nobel laureates at one time during its heyday, even surpassing that for The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the States. There are lessons that NTU and NUS could draw here. University education should not be organised around the priority of short term returns, but should take the approach of the Imperial College, i.e. to emphasise on talent-building, along with promoting innovation and invention and the pursuit of truth, as the key guiding principles.

On a separate note, two former Chancellors/ Rectors of the Imperial College have previously communicated to this writer their fervent wish to set up an affiliate school in China. Their difficulty is non-familiarity with the system and environment within China. In this respect, NTU could come in as a useful partner since NTU has both the experience and proven track record in their Chinese cooperation projects, specifically with the success of their Mayors’ Class. Moreover, Mainland Chinese students account for the highest percentage of overseas students at Imperial College. There is definitely a huge potential for both the alumni of Imperial College and NTU to collaborate, whether in enterprise or academia.

As an example, NTU already offers a double degree in Chinese Medicine. This 6-year programme which aims to build expertise on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), will give the new NTU Medical School that extra edge, since TCM is increasingly a hot topic in the world medicine field.

The NTU-Imperial College joint medical school in Singapore is a strategic partnership that provides an enormous impetus to Singapore’s tertiary education. I for one am convinced that this collaboration will reap success.

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This article is based solely on the writer’s own views.