Decision soon on new uni’s partners

Discussions held with top US, Chinese schools

BY LEE SEK HWAI

SINGAPORE'S trail-blazing plan to bring top Chinese and American universities here to help run the country's new university is nearly complete, says Education Minister Ng Eng Hen.

A decision on the partners in both those countries will be reached by the end of the year, he told reporters yesterday after signing a new education cooperation pact with China.

"We've got serious proposals from leading US universities and we will make a decision in the next one to two months," Dr Ng said.

"We're also in serious discussions with the Chinese; the presidents of top Chinese universities are coming to Singapore (for talks) or have come. We should be making a decision (on our Chinese partner) in the second half of this year."

The new institution - yet to be named - is to be Singapore's fourth publicly funded university. It will focus on design and architecture, applied sciences, engineering and business.

Scheduled to open in 2011 with 500 students, the university aims to grow its student population to 12,000. The upcoming trilateral tie-up would be its defining feature, since intra-university cooperation has traditionally been limited to two institutions at a time.

A visiting Chinese official delegation led by State Councillor Liu Yandong yesterday inked a new Singapore-China memorandum of understanding on education that highlights Beijing’s strong support for the school.

"I think with their strong support, it paves the way for us to find a suitable and top Chinese university partner. It's a very good start for our new university," said Dr Ng, who signed the MOU with Chinese Education Minister Zhou Ji.

The agreement will "broaden and deepen" exchanges between scholars, teachers and students on both sides, Dr Ng added. Its signing capped a day of back-to-back programmes for Madam Liu, the highest-ranked woman in the Chinese government and the ruling Communist Party.

She and her 20-strong delegation arrived in Singapore on Thursday for a four-day visit - her first foray to an Asian country since she became one of China's five state councillors last year.

"It's because Singapore is China's good neighbour and good partner. Bilateral relations have entered a fast-paced, stable and mature development track," Madam Liu said yesterday during a tour of the Confucius Institute at Nanyang Technological University.

Opened in 2007, the institute is among the first of about 300 centres of Chinese learning that China has set up in 78 countries. Last year alone, it enrolled 4,000 students and held almost 80 courses from basic Mandarin to ink painting.

Such a track record prompted Madam Liu to term the institute "the model of China-Singapore education cooperation."

She later called on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Istana. They discussed ways to strengthen cooperation in education and science and technology, as well as the global financial crisis, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

Madam Liu will call on Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew today, before returning to China tomorrow.

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