NTU’s challenge: To find a niche for itself

The university should build on its strengths, says Education Minister

By Liaw Wy-Cin

COMPUTER maker Apple revolutionised the smartphone industry with its iPhone, threatening phnomaker Nokia’s position as market leader in the US$50 billion ($72 billion) smartphone market.

So what would Nanyang Technological University’s equivalent of the iPhone be, to make it stand out as a university? Education Minister Ng Eng Hen threw up this challenge to NTU yesterday: “In what fields should it seek to distinguish and differentiate itself, to be among the best, bearing in mind that it is not realistic for any university to excel in all fields?”

Dr Ng was speaking at the opening of NTU’s new building for the School of Physical and Mathematical Sciences.

In his speech to an audience of about 500, mostly scientists here for an international conference to celebrate the school’s opening, Dr Ng mapped out the changes in the education landscape – one that was more competitive.

In lauding NTU’s achievements over the past 30 years, he highlighted some of its strengths which could be tapped to steer its course for the next lap.

One area is NTU’s strong links with China, its East-West connections, and partnerships with top overseas institutions, all of which will stand the university in good stead in the impending shift in economic influence from the West to the East, said Dr Ng.

Another area is the university’s strengths in science and technology, engineering and business, he added.

The third area is NTU’s research and development foray into earth sciences and environment and water research.

Environment R&D, especially in water, is becoming popular here and the Republic is well-positioned to conduct such research, said Mr Chow Chan Ho, general manager for multinational water technologies company GE Water’s Asean region.

When contacted, Government Parliamentary Committee for education chair-man Josephine Teo said NTU could look to its roots for inspiration. “The university started as Nanyang University (Nantah) and people remember Nantah students as not only being inquisitive in science, but who were also socially conscious and very engaged citizens, very strong in the humanities.

“Perhaps NTU could build on the Nanyang name and set itself apart by focusing on producing students very strong in engineering but who are also able to appreciate the humanities,” she said.

A board meeting next month will discuss areas the university hopes to distinguish itself in, and a decision is likely to be announced in September, the university’s president, Dr Su Guoming, told reporters at the event.

NTU board member Inderjit Singh, who is chief executive of semiconductor company Infiniti Solutions, sees entrepreneurship, business, science and technology as the university’s strengths.

He said: “Our focus should be how to apply our strengths across the board, to have cross-disciplinary programmes, such as applying technology and engineering into science and business, for example, and those are some of the things we will be discussing at the meeting.”

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