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The global war for talent: responses and challenges in the Singapore higher education system

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This article considers the Singapore government’s aims to develop its higher education system into a Global Schoolhouse to tap into a lucrative global market in higher education. To do so, the higher education system in Singapore needs to compete globally for talent. This article examines the responses and challenges of the Singapore higher education system against the backdrop of the global talent war. It first describes the higher education system in Singapore and analyses the system’s response to the talent war. Then, it examines the issues and challenges in attracting world class universities and top academics and in attracting talented foreign university students. In particular, although Singapore has been successful in some regards, the challenges are the growth of this education hub in a government-controlled approach, cultural differences between locals and foreign talents and local sentiments to foreign talent.

Keywords: culture; globalisation; higher education; policies; talent; talent war

The global war for talent is a fierce competition among many economies that are coping with the effects of globalisation. Attracting and retaining talent has entered political and economic discourse in recent history owing to the rise of the knowledge age and the need for creative knowledge workers (Drucker, 1998, 2000; Goffee & Jones, 2009; Ng, 2011; Reich, 1991). Florida (2005, p. 26) opines that the world has entered ‘the creative age because the key factor propelling us forward is the rise of creativity as the prime mover of our economy’. Creative talent provides the critical distinction between economies or companies that grow and innovate and those that struggle to survive (Cohen, 2001). So, according to McKinsey & Company, ‘better talent is worth fighting for’ (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998, p. 45).

Influenced by the rhetoric of a ‘global war for talent’ and the emergence of a new type of global meritocracy (e.g., Axelrod, Handfield-Jones, & Welsh, 2001; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Brown & Tannock, 2009; Chambers et al., 1998; Florida, 2005; Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001), governments are changing economic, social and even education policies to attract and retain talent, reinforcing the hegemonic development model of the competition state (Abella, 2006; Lavenex, 2007). Attracting and retaining talent is seen as a strategic approach for addressing the challenges of globalisation by investing in ‘human capital’ (Brown & Tannock, 2009). Nowadays, there are some who are critical of the rhetoric of talent and the unquestioned assumption of their great contribution to organisational and economic growth (Groysberg, Nanda, & Nohria, 2004; Pfeffer &

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Recent research (Groysberg et al., 2004; Groysberg, McLean, & Nohria, 2006, 2008) in fact supports the pivotal role of context in determining individual and organisational performance and cautions against simply ‘fighting – and winning – the “star” wars’ (Groysberg et al., 2004, p. 92). Notwithstanding such critique, many nations do exhibit behaviours of amassing talents for their own economic and developmental needs (Brown & Tannock, 2009).

The talent war is fuelled by the increasing permeability of geographic and cultural boundaries (Baruch, Budhwar, & Khatri, 2006) and the willingness for people to relocate from their native countries (Tung & Lazarova, 2006; Tung, Worm, & Petersen, 2008). Although ‘brain drain’ is a problem for many economies, they manage this problem by encouraging reverse migration trends, luring returnee immigrants who are highly qualified and attracting talent from other economies. This converts a ‘brain drain’ problem into a ‘talent flow’ dynamic to be managed (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005). The global talent war is dynamic.

Singapore is a small country with human resources as its only ‘natural’ resource. Therefore, since independence in 1965, Singapore has emphasised education as the vehicle to provide its manpower needs, as the country met the challenges of industrialisation of yesteryear and faces the challenges of the knowledge economy today. Education has always been an expenditure – a worthwhile investment for the future perhaps, but still an expenditure item on the national budget. But now, this position has changed. Education has been increasingly developed as a major revenue-generating sector in the economy (Mok & Cheung, 2011; Ng & Tan, 2010). In this light, talent becomes a catch phrase as this revenue-generating sector competes with its global counterparts.

Top talented people are much sought after and therefore have the luxury to search for places that offer a value proposition that attracts them. On top of their agenda may be questions of how a place may actually allow them to fulfil their potential and life goals and the reputation of the place which they will be associated with, whether then or in the future. These talented people not only provide companies with the most value, they have the potential to provide even more, given the right environment, guidance and nurture. Therefore, organisations and economies should focus on making themselves more valuable to talented people by improving their branding and how they are perceived by these talents (Goffee & Jones, 2009). The same could be said about the higher education system in many parts of the world (e.g. Mok & Cheung, 2011) and, in particular, in Singapore.

The war for talent is part of the wider globalisation phenomenon. Although globalisation appears to be a macro discourse, it could only be discussed effectively with reference to the local context (Beck, 2002). Therefore, this article aims to examine the responses and challenges of the Singapore higher education system against the backdrop of the global talent war. It first describes the higher education system in Singapore and analyses the system’s response to the talent war. Then, it examines the issues and challenges in attracting world class universities, top academics and talented foreign university students to Singapore.

The Singapore higher education system and its governance

There are currently five local universities in Singapore, namely the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore Management University (SMU), Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) and the SIM University. The first four are government-funded Autonomous Universities while the fifth is a private local university.
An Autonomous University takes full ownership of its own development, allowing it to become more responsive in tailoring its educational and research agenda to meet national needs and enhancing the educational experience for its students. However, the government maintains centralised control over the local universities through systems of accountability and funding. The government has stated that despite their autonomy, local autonomous universities as national universities must also continue to fulfil their critical roles of training graduate manpower for Singapore’s economy (Ministry of Education, 2007). In particular, parliamentary acts make provision for the government to provide funding to the Autonomous Universities, which will be expected to deploy the resources only for those objectives agreed to by the Education Minister. The Minister also has the power to appoint and remove Trustees and to give his consent for the admission and removal of members of the university; the disposal of the university’s undertaking or property; the voluntary winding-up of the university; and any alterations to the university’s constituent documents.

Educational quality assurance is a matter of great concern for the Singapore government (Ng, 2008, 2010). An accountability framework for universities, comprising the existing Quality Assurance Framework for Universities and a set of Policy and Performance Agreements between the Ministry of Education (MOE) and each university, ensures that quality is not compromised (University Autonomy & Governance and Funding Steering Committee, 2005). Although these publicly funded universities have enjoyed considerable autonomy since the passing of the University Corporatization Act in 2005, the government is still able to maintain control over this sector through such performance frameworks (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011; Lee & Gopinathan, 2007). The Autonomous Universities, though ‘autonomous’, are more accurately described as ‘state-funded, privately managed and publicly accountable institutions’ (Ng & Tan, 2010, p. 182).

Other than the local public universities, transnational higher education is a vibrant industry in Singapore. The inclusion of higher education as an industry under the General Agreement of Trade in Services framework has brought about a much changed global higher education landscape (Knight, 2006). There are now various providers of higher education in Singapore, using modes ranging from having local campuses, conducting joint programmes with local institutions, distance-learning and twinning programmes.

The responses of the Singapore higher education system to the talent war

With a global education market valued at approximately $US2.2 trillion, Singapore’s higher education sector is positioned as a major revenue-generating sector of the economy (Chan & Ng, 2008; Ng & Tan, 2010; Yeo, 2003). The vision is to position Singapore as a ‘Global Schoolhouse’ (Yeo, 2003) – the ‘Boston of Asia’ and the ‘Mecca for diplomas, degrees and higher education’ (Duhamel, 2004, p. 40). George Yeo, who was then the Minister for Trade and Industry, explained that if Singapore were able to double or triple the number of international students to 100,000 or 150,000, there would be all kinds of economic spin-offs, including benefits to retail and housing rental markets. Moreover, the overseas students would expand Singapore’s international network when they returned home (Yeo, 2003).

However, to grow this lucrative knowledge-intensive industry to gain international reputation and gain a bigger market share, talent is crucial. The higher education system in Singapore needs world-class universities, top academics. It also needs to attract the best students in the world to receive education at its institutions. In other words, against a backdrop of a global war for talent, the higher education system in Singapore also needs to compete globally for talent.
Attracting world-class universities and top academics

Since the mid-1990s, Singapore has been strategically inviting world-class universities to set up Centres of Excellence in the country to spearhead research & development (R&D) and knowledge transfer to the industries, all in line with the vision of Global Schoolhouse or global education hub (Ng & Tan, 2010; Olds, 2007; Sidhu, 2009). The world-class universities that have come into the Singapore higher education scene include INSEAD (Institut Européen d’Administration des Affaires), University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Technische Universität Eindhoven, Technische University Munchen, Georgia Institute of Technology and Johns Hopkins University (Ng & Tan, 2010).

Local universities are also exhorted to adopt an entrepreneurial model (Wong, Ho, & Singh, 2007). Under the auspices of the government, local universities form partnerships with quality foreign universities as part of the expansion and diversification in the local higher education landscape (Chan & Ng, 2008; Gopinathan & Lee, 2011; Ng & Tan, 2010). For example, in what was the first German-Asian university partnership, TUM Asia, a fully owned subsidiary of Technische Universität München, offered joint post-graduate degrees with NUS and NTU. The Singapore National Institute of Education, part of the NTU, launched a joint dual-degree educational doctorate with the Institute of Education, University of London. The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, part of the NUS, collaborated with Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, London School of Economics and Political Science and the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris to offer a double master’s degree. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts tied up with the Institute of Education, University of London. The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, part of the NUS, collaborated with Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, London School of Economics and Political Science and the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris to offer a double master’s degree. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts tied up with the Institute of Education, University of London. The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, part of the NUS, collaborated with Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, London School of Economics and Political Science and the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris to offer a double master’s degree. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts tied up with the Institute of Education, University of London. More recently, SUTD collaborated with Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Zhejiang University to bring a multi-disciplinary approach to learning with design as a discipline at its core. NUS tied up with Yale University to launch a liberal arts programme.

Another part of the response to the global war for talent is to attract top foreign academics to work in Singapore’s higher education institutions. The government tries to entice top foreign professors to come to Singapore by generous research grants and attractive remunerations. In recent years, Singapore has attracted quite a number of these top professors to come to the island-nation to pursue research in their respective fields. Notably, there were Nobel Prize winner British biologist Sydney Brenner; American medical researchers Neal Copeland and Nancy Jenkins, who had worked at the National Cancer Institute in Maryland; Alan Coleman, who was part of the team that cloned Dolly the sheep; and Edison Liu, expert on functional genomics of human cancers. Although these examples could be considered as successes in attracting top foreign talent, retaining these talented foreigners is a much more difficult issue, with varying levels of success in each case.

For example, Neal Copeland and Nancy Jenkins returned to the United States after a few years. According to a news report, they were frustrated with dealing with red tape and the increased pressure to focus on economic outcomes to get funding (Wong, 2011). Another expert in the biomedical field, Professor Edison Liu, left Singapore to take on headship at a renowned genetics research facility in Maine, US. According to a report, biologists in Singapore felt that their community received too much pressure from funding agencies to generate economic returns (Normile, 2011). In fact, the differences in corporate cultures between a university in Singapore and another in the West probably make any foreign academic wonder whether he or she will fit in and thrive in an environment that is not reputed to be open. Foreign academics may not wish to follow an official research agenda just because the financial support is there. Sydney Brenner, however, has stayed in Singapore and received the Distinguished Friends of Singapore award in 2000 for his
contributions to the progress in life sciences in the country. Alan Coleman now divides his time as principal investigator at the Institute of Medical Biology in Singapore and as the new director of Stem Cell Centre in King’s College London. Attracting and retaining foreign talent is therefore not a straightforward matter. Outcomes differ on a case by case basis. Responding to the talent war becomes a constant exercise in managing a dynamic flow-through of foreign talent in the country.

In recent years, instead of the ‘big whales’, the government has turned to headhunting young foreign scholars and awarding them research grants to pursue their cutting-edge research in Singapore. For example, in 2011, 11 young foreign scientists were picked out of 174 applicants worldwide, each to be given a 5-year, $3 million research grant (National Research Foundation, 2011) for their work. One of them was Dr Kimberly Kline, an American scientist whose research examined how bacteria resistant to modern antibiotics could be tackled. Dr Kline remarked that the grant provided an ideal springboard for her contribution to the research-intensive community in Singapore (National Research Foundation, 2011).

Attracting talented foreign students

Recruitment of international students to study in Singapore is a government-initiated and supported endeavour through various ministries or statutory boards. The idea is to promote Singapore’s international brand as a provider of quality education, provide support for local institutions to reach out to their niche market through various platforms and establish credible channels of information that further promote Singapore as a world-class learning hub among international students. However, to gain world-class recognition, Singapore needs to attract talented foreign students. One way of doing so is to give scholarships to bright foreign students.

There are numerous scholarships for high flying foreign students in Singapore. Some of these scholarships are available in all education institutions across Singapore but are open only to student applicants from specific countries like those from ASEAN countries, India and Hong Kong. Examples of such scholarships are the ASEAN Scholarships, SIA Youth Scholarship and Hong Kong Scholarship. There are also some scholarships that are open to all types of nationality but are only offered to study programmes in specific institutes of higher learning. For example, SMU offers the SMU Sports Scholarship and the Ian Ferguson Foundation Scholarship, while NTU offers the Nanyang Scholarship and the NatSteel Asia’s Scholarship. There are also scholarships offered to students from specified countries and are only available in selected universities. For instance, the Dr Goh Keng Swee Scholarship is offered only to applicants from the ASEAN countries who study at NTU or NUS. To facilitate scholarship application, there is in fact a one-stop online portal called Brightsparks that consolidates relevant information and updates on all matters of scholarship in Singapore, from sourcing to application to tracking scholarship status. Such facilities make it simple and appealing for foreign talented students to secure scholarships to study in Singapore.

Other than scholarships, there are two grant schemes under MOE for non-citizens – the Tuition Grant Scheme and the Service Obligation Scheme. The Tuition Grant Scheme is for full-time diploma and undergraduate students who are non-Singaporean or Singapore Permanent Residents. In this scheme, students are required to sign a Tuition Grant Agreement, contractually obliging them to render service to Singapore-based companies for 3 years upon the completion of their studies. This scheme is open to students studying in various learning institutions specified under the grant. International students pursuing their
post-graduate studies in the four local publicly funded universities (NTU, NUS, SMU and SUTD) may apply for the Service Obligation Scheme. Under this scheme, international students must serve a 3-year bond to work with Singapore-based companies upon graduation.

**Issues and challenges**

Although the higher education system in Singapore has responded to the global war for talent, there are various issues and challenges, namely:

- Government control and the long-term development of the Global Schoolhouse
- Cultural differences between local and foreign institutions and talents
- Local sentiments to influx of foreign talent

**Government control and the long-term development of the global schoolhouse**

Developing the Global Schoolhouse is a government agenda. Therefore, true to its pragmatic style of governance, the universities that can enter the market are top-notch universities in the world, specifically invited by the Singapore government (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011; Lee & Gopinathan, 2007). The Global Schoolhouse is carefully cultivated and regulated by the government. Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and for Education, Mr. S Iswaran, explained the government’s philosophy in this matter in Parliament:

> Firstly, we put effort in selecting the right partners of the highest quality. Secondly, these partnerships are structured to mutually benefit Singapore and its partners. Thirdly, we will also ensure that capabilities are transferred to and embedded in our institutions, so that the value lasts not just for the duration of the partnership, but yields long term benefits. As a principle, MOE calibrates resources allocated and ensures that the funding for each collaboration is commensurate with its scope and scale. It is also tied to milestones which meet the objectives of the collaboration. Is there a risk that embarking on such collaborations will not yield what we seek? The answer is yes. But does it mean that we do not embark on such ventures? I think the overall benefits outweigh the costs and the risks so we should ensure that we meticulously structure the arrangements to mitigate downside risks and maximise benefits to us. (Iswaran, 2011, para 5)

This is a business-oriented and transactional approach to collaborations with foreign institutions. The government consciously mitigates risks and maximises benefit. While there are now various shining examples of success, the case of the University of New South Wales (UNSW), however, is an example of the government’s approach that did not work out as expected (see Chan & Ng, 2008; Ng & Tan, 2010). The UNSW Asia was intended to be a comprehensive research and teaching university situated in Singapore, wholly owned by its parent institution. The UNSW aimed to set up a comprehensive university in Singapore with a sprawling campus that was specially built for it. The UNSW could plan to set up such a campus because it was counting on strong financial support from the Singapore government through the Economic Development Board. A total of $S32.3 million was given by the Economic Development Board to the UNSW, of which $S17.3 million was in grants and $S15 million in loans.

However, the support package came with strings attached. According to the Economic Development Board, the support package, which comprised tax incentives, grants and loans, were ‘recallable if pre-agreed milestones and outcomes are not met’ (quoted in
Davie, 2007, p. 29). These outcomes included enrolment numbers. However, the inaugural intake in 2007 had an enrolment that was lower than anticipated. According to Professor Fred Hilmer, the UNSW Vice-chancellor, the lower-than-anticipated enrolments put the university into an unsustainable financial position. In 2006, UNSW Asia (Singapore campus) spent slightly more than the $S17.3 million that the Economic Development Board of Singapore had given it in grants. The university had also taken on a debt of $S156.8 million, from which it had already drawn down $S21 million. UNSW main campus had only $A200 million in reserves. Just barely 2 months into its operation in March 2007, UNSW announced its closure and complete withdrawal from Singapore.

This episode gives potential overseas partners reason to pause. The Singapore government does expect its foreign counterparts to deliver their part of the deal. The government is prepared to be generous with financial grants and facilitate any development aligned with its intention but is always cautious at the governance level (Chan & Ng, 2008). Throughout Singapore’s history since independence, the government has been the big player in various key sectors of the economy, taking the initiative in attracting foreign direct investment to them, with the private sector following behind. The same is now happening in the Global Schoolhouse. The strong government presence in these collaborations with world-class universities has its advantages and disadvantages (Ng & Tan, 2010). On the one hand, strong government presence and investments undoubtedly hasten the pace at which Singapore is placed on the world higher education map. But, the downside with such an ‘industrial targeting’ approach is that it may become its own victim, because the economy is driving ahead of its learning maturity (Young, 1992). Given the deliberate government interventions business-oriented and transactional approach, the question is whether higher education system may mature to produce a self-sustaining system in the long term with a reasonable rate of internal capacity and productivity.

Cultural differences between local and foreign institutions and talent

Attracting foreign universities and talented academics is not a straightforward matter of offering excellent funding arrangements or remuneration packages. There are many cultural differences to be considered. One pertinent cultural difference is the interpretation of ‘academic freedom’. There have been questions of whether academic pursuits can flourish ‘freely’ in Singapore, with the government being described as authoritarian (Rodan, 2004) and controlling (Trocki, 2006). This is a challenge that Singapore will have to address in attracting foreign talents with different cultural values and interpretations.

A recent illustration of this challenge is the case of the Yale-NUS Liberal Arts Programme. In September 2010, NUS and Yale University signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a liberal arts programme that combines the eastern and western schools of thought on liberal arts education. This venture is the first of its kind in Asia and is supposed to be a landmark partnership to create a new model of undergraduate education for Asia. Set to begin in July 2013, pioneering students from Singapore will be engaged in an immersion programme in Yale’s New Haven campus to introduce students to the liberal arts education and residential college life. This would involve students engaging in Yale’s extracurricular and academic life, intramural sports, Rector’s Teas and creating their own events through active student government.

However, there are inherent complexities of bringing together two very different cultures into scholarly pursuits. Indeed, the cultures of an American institution can be rather different from a Singapore institution, with differing interpretations of the concepts of ‘liberal education’, ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’. This is a complex issue the new institute
must grapple with, especially in a liberal arts programme. While the administrators at both universities were keen about the collaboration, some staff members of Yale were not too enthusiastic at the prospect. The *Yale Daily News* reported:

> When University President Richard Levin and University Provost Peter Salovey first announced the project in September 2010, a small group of professors objected to Yale’s decision to open a jointly run campus in a nation that they said could not support the University’s values. That debate intensified in New Haven earlier this month when roughly 150 professors gathered at the Yale College faculty meeting for nearly three hours to hear colleagues voice concern about Yale-NUS. (Kofman & Stephenson, 2012, para 2–3)

Despite opposition from Yale president Richard Levin, professors of the university passed a resolution that urged the Yale-NUS college to ‘uphold civil liberty and political freedom on campus and in the broader society’ and ‘respect, protect and further principles of non-discrimination for all’ (Aw, 2012, para 2). After the resolution was passed, Levin openly declared that while he valued the engagement of his colleagues and their commitment to important principles, he opposed the resolution because it did not capture the mutual respect that has characterised the Yale-NUS collaboration from the beginning (Aw, 2012).

Even so, the administrators at both universities have affirmed their commitment to develop the new college. Academic staff members from Yale criticised its President, Professor Levin, for moving ahead with the collaboration with NUS without adequate consultation with the Yale faculty. Several Yale faculty members have questioned whether Yale ‘sold out’ in partnering with NUS and whether the university was expanding for the sake of expansion and joining the academic ‘gold rush’. Levin, however, maintained that the partnership was ultimately the decision of the Yale Corporation (Kofman & Stephenson, 2012).

However, not all at Yale were against the partnership. A news report (Kai, 2012) reported that Professor Pericles Lewis, who has been a Yale faculty member of the English and Comparative Literature departments since 1998 and appointed as the first president of the new college, addressed the issue of academic freedom in Singapore. He stated that Yale, in partnering with NUS, made an agreement to guarantee academic freedom, which NUS also strongly supported. Clarifying that students could talk about whatever they wanted and professors could teach whatever they wanted and could pursue research that might be controversial, he felt that ‘... things are changing here (in Singapore) rapidly, and a lot of people in the US have a sense of it only from old newspaper reports’ (Kai, 2012, para 8).

Another news report also reported that Lewis had spoken to academics in Singapore, both local and foreign, and was satisfied that staff members were free to teach and research controversial issues (Davie, 2012). Given the media attention on this matter, the Education Minister Heng Swee Keat clarified in Parliament that this was essentially an internal issue to Yale and was being addressed by the Yale administration. However, he noted that the Yale administration had discussed with NUS on ‘how they could jointly correct any misconceptions about Singapore among the different stakeholders of the university’ and that ‘several thoughtful Singaporeans and foreigners who understood Singapore well had written in various fora to provide fair and objective perspectives of Singapore’s society’ (See 2012, para 3–4).

**Local sentiments towards the influx of foreign talent**

There is a growing sentiment among Singaporeans that local university places are increasingly lost to foreign students. Because higher education in Singapore is subsidised for citizens and there are only so few local universities, competition has been very keen. The
increased presence of talented foreign students in their midst have caused tensions among the locals. News reports have heightened the awareness and discussion of this issue. For example, a perturbed university student in her freshman year was reported as saying that as local students, they saw foreign peers as tough competition, which made local students frustrated instead of being motivated (Lur, 2011). A high school student was reported to have lamented over the unfair treatment of being pitted against international students and having a very slim chance of studying at a local university despite the more rigorous pre-university education they had received in Singapore (Lur, 2011).

Members of the Parliament have also raised the issue of foreign talents in Parliament, questioning whether the government has put too much emphasis on attracting talented foreign students at the cost of displacing local students (Ministry of Education, 2011a, 2012). For example, a Member of the Parliament, Lim Biow Chuan, summed the sentiments up during a parliament session by indicating that some Singaporean students were unhappy because they could not secure places in local universities and had to pay high fees for overseas university education, when there were places taken up by foreign students who might not appreciate these places in the first place (Lim, 2011).

A recent case of a derogatory remark on an online posting by a foreign scholar in a local university subjected the government’s policy on granting scholarship to talented foreign students to intense scrutiny. Many citizens debated the case in different public forums, mostly in online communities, on the soundness of government policy on attracting foreign talent. This foreign scholar was given a government scholarship since he was a secondary school student. In February 2012, he posted a derogatory remark on his personal account in a social-networking site, stating that ‘there are more dogs than humans in Singapore’ in reference to his unpleasant experiences with Singaporeans (Chua, 2012). Many Singaporeans took offence. For the locals, the remark reflected the ingratitude of the scholar towards the country that has helped him secure a good future with the quality of education he has been given access to and even sponsored for.

Within weeks, the university chastised the student with a hefty fine of SG$3000, a revocation of his scholarship grant and SG$8200 disbursement for his final semester. He was supposed to graduate in June 2012 but now had to take an extra semester as part of the disciplinary action. He was still accountable to complete his six-year scholarship bond to work in Singapore (Nanayakara & Tong, 2012). The Provost and the university’s Board of Discipline have expressed regret that the scholars’ remark ‘had stirred up considerable unease, distrust and ill-will in the community’ (Chan, 2012). The Education Ministry also expressed its disappointment over the ‘irresponsible’ remark from the scholar.

Understanding the local sentiments, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat reassured the citizens:

The universities, various community organisations and government agencies award scholarships and bursaries to locals for studies in our local universities. In AY2010, a total of around 30,300 Singapore Citizens received a scholarship or some form of financial assistance which helped fund their undergraduate education. The Government intends to offer more scholarships to locals, to nurture a strong core of Singaporean talent with the requisite skills to anchor our key current and emerging economic sectors, and secure our future. (Ministry of Education, 2011b, para 5–6)

However, even given the potential political costs, the government maintains that there is still a need for Singapore to accept foreign talent into the country. Prime Minister Lee, in asserting this position, argues that Singapore has to find the right balance, rather than to
take extreme positions, to ‘address the stresses and strains that people feel but also track and respond to our external challenges and keep our long-term strategies right’ (Lee, 2011, para 8). The challenge is of course to ‘get our politics right as well as our policies right’ (Lee, 2011, para 8), something not easily achieved. The Prime Minister even exhorted the local students:

> There are many benefits for the local students to have foreign classmates. It prepares them better for the global workplace, it exposes them to the competition and makes them, spurs them to work harder and give their best and quite often the local and the foreign students will even partner and make new start-ups. (Lee, 2011, para 32)

Having said so, the government is still taking steps to modify policies regarding foreign higher education student admission to reassure the locals that they are the government’s priority. Admission of foreign students is currently capped at 18 per cent per cohort as of 2011 (Choo, 2011). The MOE intends to reduce this to 15 per cent and to add 2000 more places for local students to be admitted into the local universities by 2015 (Hoe & Kotwani, 2011; Lee, 2011). This means that in 3 years’ time, there will be an increase from 27 per cent to 30 per cent of the cohort per year who will attend state-funded universities (Wong, 2012).

**Conclusion**

This article has explained how the higher education system in Singapore aimed to be the Global Schoolhouse and has responded to the global war for talent. This article has also examined the issues and challenges that Singapore faced in this talent war:

- Government control and the long-term development of the Global Schoolhouse
- Cultural differences between local and foreign institutions and talents
- Local sentiments to influx of foreign talent

Looking ahead, the three issues mentioned above will continue to challenge the Singapore Global Schoolhouse as it competes with the world for talent. Challenges notwithstanding, the Singapore government has been known for its proactive stance in tackling issues and solving problems. Certain shifts in policy will be made, albeit in a calibrated manner.

Fundamentally, one of the tensions is that while the government still wants control of higher education development, it is increasingly difficult to do so. Generous grants may be attractive initially, but the measured and goal-oriented approach may not retain the highly talented people. However, the Singapore government has already begun to shift towards a middle ground ‘regulated self-regulation’ framework (Mok, 2005, 2008), in which public Autonomous Universities and private universities are increasingly involved in higher education policy-making and implementation, in view of their increasingly important roles in education. Mok (2005, p. 20) opines that ‘a self-regulatory framework should be established in governing these newly emerging private/non-state education coordination institutions, providing that these participative institutions still follow the overarching framework or directions set out by the state’.

Another tension for Singapore is its foreign talent policy. This does not mean that foreign talents should be rejected; after all, early Singaporeans were migrants to begin with. What it does mean is that, as the Singapore society becomes increasingly influenced by globalisation, then a clinical and prescriptive interpretation of ‘attracting foreign talent’ will prove to be inadequate to address the new realities. Instead, the state should closely monitor an issue that is complex, fluid and evolving. Although foreign talent policies
appear to be an economic strategy, social issues and indeed political costs will be the critical issues that the government will need to grapple with. The process of change is complex, rather than clinical. In such a system, complexity theory asserts that the exchanges among the many interacting stakeholders and impinging factors are non-linear, highly intertwinned and magnified over a multitude of iterations, making the outcomes of governmental interventions virtually impossible to guarantee (Ng, 2009).

The issues and challenges surrounding the global war for talent in Singapore higher education system serve as a useful case study on the attempts and challenges faced by many states in designing and implementing their talent policies to further their national agenda. There are, and arguably will always be, subtle social tensions inherent in such public policies. As the economy reaps some benefits from the policies, it will also have to manage the consequences.

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