

enroll. Under such scenarios, IBCs have only limited opportunity for curriculum development and can never become full-fledged universities. This limits their growth and makes them more vulnerable to changes in the academic and labor landscape.

### CONCLUSION

The restrictions highlighted in this essay violate several key forms of autonomy that academics have come to expect at a world-class institution. IBCs will continue to have difficulty attracting and retaining high-quality faculty and administrators if they are perceived as being lesser institutions. Because of this, the IBC will struggle to achieve quality at par with its parent institution.

Restrictions on autonomy may pose problems for the host country's goals as well. While host countries are focused on promoting quality and ensuring alignment with their objectives, they may find potential partners declining to open a branch campus because of a lack of sufficient autonomy. This could actually threaten the success of the host country's overall vision.

Most notably, diminished autonomy threatens the sustainability and quality of IBCs. Limiting their flexibility to make operational or academic changes in response to the needs of their students and the local economy may increase their susceptibility to failure.

Given these challenges, IBC leaders should consider an approach that emphasizes a shared set of goals, with flexibility in how to achieve these goals. Otherwise IBCs may become mere providers of education, dependent on their hosts, rather than institutions of higher education capable of setting their own path. ■

---



---

## Singapore's "Global Schoolhouse" Aspirations

JASON TAN

*Jason Tan is associate professor, policy & leadership studies, National Institute of Education, Singapore. E-mail: engthye.tan@nie.edu.sg. This article also appears in Higher Education in Southeast Asia and Beyond.*

The "global schoolhouse" vision was outlined by Singapore's ministry of trade and industry in a 2002 report. One of the sections in the report focused on the education industry. The ministry claimed that Singapore was well placed to gain a piece of the estimated US\$2.2 trillion world

education market. An ambitious target of 150,000 international full-fee paying students was set for the year 2015, up from the then estimated figure of 50,000.

Several economic advantages for pursuing this vision were outlined. For instance, the increase in institutional spending and the spending of the foreign students would fuel economic growth and create high-paying jobs. Secondly, the influx of foreign students would contribute human capital to knowledge-based activities such as research and development, patent generation, and enterprise development. Next, an increase in the number of educational institutions as well as a greater diversity of courses would help stem the outflow of domestic students to overseas universities. Lastly, foreign students would boost Singapore's pool of talented individuals and form a network of international alumni around the world.

The report recommended a three-tiered system of universities form the core of the global schoolhouse. At the apex would be so-called "world-class universities." These universities would focus primarily on postgraduate education, and would be "niche centers of excellence" contributing to research and development. The second tier would be the three preexisting, publicly funded universities—the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and the Singapore Management University—the so-called "bedrock" universities, which would carry out research and development activities, supply the bulk of domestic university-educated manpower to meet national needs, attract regional students through scholarships, and fulfil the concept of education as a public good. Forming the base of the pyramid would be "additional private universities." These universities would focus on teaching and applied research, and cater to the bulk of the additional 100,000 foreign students envisioned in the global schoolhouse.

### SOCIAL CONTEXT

The global schoolhouse vision was the latest in a string of policy initiatives that trumpeted the key role played by education in supporting national economic competitiveness. It also represented a move towards the marketization and commodification of education. In 1996, the then prime minister announced the government's intention to turn Singapore into the "Boston of the East," with Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology serving as role models for NUS and NTU to develop into world-class institutions. Next, the state-affiliated Economic Development Board (EDB) announced in 1998 its intention to attract at least 10 so-called world-class universities to Singapore within the next decade. This initiative managed to attract prestigious institutions such as Johns Hopkins University, the University of Chicago, and INSEAD, a French

graduate business school. The global schoolhouse project fitted in well with the longstanding policy of welcoming foreign students.

#### OBSTACLES

Right from its inception, the global schoolhouse initiative was plagued with various difficulties. First, there were a few rather embarrassing high-profile cases of foreign universities withdrawing their campuses and programs, or being asked to terminate their Singapore operations after a few years.

For instance, the state-funded Agency for Science, Technology and Research announced in July 2006 that it would be closing Johns Hopkins University's biomedical research facility due to the latter's failure to recruit the anticipated number of doctoral students. In addition, despite having received more than US\$50 million in EDB funding since 1998, the research facility had failed to meet eight out of its 13 performance benchmarks. In another debacle, four months after the opening of the University of New South Wales (UNSW)-Asia campus in February 2007, the home campus in Sydney announced that UNSW-Asia would close in June that year because of insufficient student numbers and worries over financial viability.

---

### The report recommended a three-tiered system of universities form the core of the global schoolhouse.

---

In the last few years, Singapore's global schoolhouse has suffered further setbacks with the announcement of yet another three campus closures. In 2012, the Tisch School of the Arts Asia decided to end its Master's courses in film, animation, media production, and dramatic writing. The School had been suffering financial deficits for all five years of its existence despite having received about US\$17 million in financial subsidies from EDB and additional funds from New York University.

In 2013, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business said it would move its executive education program from Singapore to Hong Kong in order to be nearer the thriving People's Republic of China economy. At the same time, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas announced the closure of its Bachelor's program in hospitality management, citing financial viability as a reason. Yet another controversy involved the Yale-National University of Singapore College. Established in 2011 as a collaborative

venture between the two universities, it was criticized by some Yale faculty and human rights advocates, who doubted whether a liberal arts education dedicated to free inquiry could thrive within an authoritarian state with heavy restrictions on free speech and assembly.

Besides these high-profile controversies, a second difficulty facing the global schoolhouse initiative was quality assurance. The first two decades of this century witnessed several cases of fraud involving private for-profit schools shutting down suddenly and leaving their students without any recourse to financial or academic redress. It took seven years from the initial announcement of the initiative before Parliament passed the Private Education Act to regulate all private educational institutions awarding degrees, diplomas, or certificates.

A third, more recent, challenge has been increasingly acrimonious public debate over the sustainability of a liberal immigration policy. The ruling party has bowed to pressure in the last few years by tightening the reins on immigration. This change in immigration policy direction will have inevitable consequences for Singapore's hopes of becoming an education hub.

Fourteen years after the announcement of the global schoolhouse vision, the attainment of the target of 150,000 international students remains elusive. A press report in 2014 claimed that foreign student numbers fell from 97,000 in 2008 to 84,000 in 2012 and 75,000 in 2014. A Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation survey, published that same year, revealed foreign students' growing concerns over employment prospects and living costs in Singapore. Two years earlier, the trade and industry minister had told Parliament that the global schoolhouse initiative would emphasize quality of education and economic relevance rather than student numbers or GDP share. His statement was an implicit acknowledgement that the original target of 150,000 international full-fee paying students was nowhere in sight. ■



In addition to our Web site and Facebook page, we are now tweeting. We hope you will consider "following" us on Twitter!