



from the October 02, 2007 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1002/p07s01-woap.html>

Singapore officials envision 'Boston of the East'

New York University opened a program there this fall.

By Simon Montlake | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Singapore

If the planners of this [orderly](#) city-state had their way, it would become known as the "Boston of the East," a center of brainpower to match the brawn of Asia's manufacturers.

Over the past decade, Singapore has courted foreign universities with subsidies and partnerships, and showered aid on promising overseas students. It aims to create an education hub for students in Asia who want an international degree but may not have the income or the grades to study in the West. It has targeted an enrollment of 150,000 foreign students by 2015, up from about 80,000 currently.

These ambitions mirror the rapid growth in global education. The number of students studying abroad rose to 2.7 million in 2005, up from 1.3 million a decade earlier, according to a study released in September by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The most popular destination is the US, followed by Britain and Australia.

But Singapore's program to reverse this flow by outsourcing world-class education to its shores has run into trouble.

In June, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia closed its Singapore branch only four months after matriculating its first class of 148 freshmen. Administrators said the project wasn't viable because of low enrollment and high operating costs in Singapore.

Last year, a prestigious research partnership with Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore was dissolved amid a row over subsidies. Efforts to woo other US schools with strong research capabilities have only yielded modest tie-ups, mostly in joint graduate programs like those of the University of Chicago's business school or Cornell University's hospitality management program.

Government officials say the payoff will come in a global reputation for education as well as the creative spark for companies seeking a research hub in Asia. That means importing smart students and underwriting innovation. "[T]alent is the most critical factor that will drive economic growth.... Singapore needs to attract the best talents to maintain our global competitiveness," says Aw Kah Peng, a director at Singapore's Economic Development Board.

Singapore isn't the only country in East Asia reaching out to foreign universities. Britain's University of Nottingham opened a campus in Ningbo, China, in 2005, and the University of Liverpool followed suit in Suzhou. Both offer British degree programs to Chinese students.

[China](#) may become a potential competitor, but Singapore enjoys a lead because of its reputation as a well-run country that can duplicate the best of the West, says Pang Eng Fong, dean of the business school at the Singapore Management University (SMU). "If there's going to be any world-class universities in this region over the long term, we're best positioned to deliver," he says.

One brake on expansion is a shortage of professors. About 40 percent of the faculty at SMU, which opened in 2000 and has some 5,000 students, are overseas hires. Rising living costs are driving up salaries at a time when schools are under pressure to add places, says Mr. Pang.

This inflation goes double for the star faculty Singapore says it needs. "A major input in the education process is people to teach. In higher education, you can import professors, but you need to pay a premium for 'world-class' faculty to induce them to move from Stanford or Harvard to Singapore," says Linda Lim, a Singaporean who is professor of strategy at the University of Michigan's business school.

Remove the state subsidies, say critics, and Singapore's competitive edge begins to fray, pointing to the UNSW closure. The university had spent \$14.4 million to open a temporary campus and broken ground on a complex designed for 15,000 students before it decided in May to pull out. Vice chancellor Fred Hilmer called it an "unsustainable financial burden."

Administrators are now wrangling with Singapore over its liability for \$10.8 million in government grants, according to the Sydney Morning Herald, which reported that UNSW had refused to release details of its dealings with Singapore, citing strict secrecy laws there.

Singapore allows little [dissent](#) and closely regulates what its 4.2 million residents can see and read. That makes it an unlikely stand-in for freewheeling intellectual hubs like Boston or Oxford, where academic freedom is vigorously upheld even amid controversy, as was the case when Iran's president spoke recently at Columbia University.

Last month, police banned a lecture by Douglas Sanders, a Canadian academic, citing his opposition to colonial-era laws that criminalize homosexuality. In 2005, Britain's University of Warwick opted not to build a campus amid concerns over [academic freedom](#), though analysts say financial risk was probably a bigger factor.

That hasn't stopped New York University from taking its first steps here. On a leafy residential lane, 33 aspiring filmmakers started studies last month at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Asia. The school will offer master of fine arts programs in film production and, next year, dramatic writing – with the same admissions standards as the home campus. About half of Tisch's first students are American, with Germans, Australians, and Finnish represented as well.

Amalia Yunus, one of two Singaporeans in the program, says she had hoped to attend Tisch in New York until she heard of the new campus. Her parents worried the degree here would not be as prestigious. Then came the UNSW closure. But Ms. Yunus, who had studied abroad, is upbeat about staying home. "I know the quality of education I will get. It's just the Singaporean mind-set" to prize a foreign degree, she says.

[Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links](#)

[Home](#) | [About Us/Help](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Archive](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Special Projects](#) | [Corrections](#)

[Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights & Permissions](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Today's Article on Christian Science](#)

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2007 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.