EDUCATING THE WORLD: THE SINGAPORE MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Global competition for international students is heating up, with countries around the world eager to capture a slice of the lucrative education market estimated at US$2.2 trillion. Singapore, in particular, has leveraged on its cosmopolitan image and reputation as a quality education destination to draw international students from around the region. This paper provides a brief overview of Singapore's foray into the world education market. It discusses some of the city-state's unique qualities that have made it one of the choice destinations for education among international students and their parents. Findings from a recent survey of international students are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Singapore's education sector is abuzz with activity. Thousands of international students flock to Singapore each year, attracted by the city-state's reputation for quality education, cosmopolitan living, and potential employment with the 7,000 multinational corporations that have set up offices across the island. According to the Singapore Economic Board, these students originate mostly from countries such as China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, and Vietnam.

Although official figures are not readily available, the international student population in Singapore has seen a substantial increase over the past 10 years, from 50,000 in 2002 to 97,000 in 2008 (please see Table 1).

TABLE 1

YEAR	INTERNATIONAL STUDENT NUMBERS
2002	50,000
2006	80,000
2007	86,000
2008	97,000
2015 (target)	150,000

Source: Singapore Economic Development Board; Ministry of Trade & Industry; various media reports

When announcing the Global Schoolhouse initiative a decade ago, the Singapore government stated its intention to attract 150,000 international students by 2015. And, going by the above trend, it seems the city-state is right on track to achieving that goal.

The Global Schoolhouse initiative was introduced in 2002, while the island was grappling with an economic recession. The initiative outlined several targets for the education industry. In addition to tripling the foreign student population, the Singapore government aimed to woo world-class universities to set up campuses across the island, raise the education sector's contribution to the city's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 1.9% to 5%, create 22,000 jobs in the education sector, and ultimately position Singapore as a "premier education hub" (Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore; see https://app.mti.gov.sg/data/pages/507/doc/DSE_recommend.pdf). A year later in 2003, the Singapore government announced the launch of Singapore Education, a multi-government agency initiative led by the Singapore Economic Development Board, and supported by the Singapore Tourism Board, International Enterprise (IE) Singapore, SPRING Singapore, and the Ministry of Education. The Singapore Tourism Board, in particular, was tasked to market the Singapore brand of education internationally and draw international students to the city-state through education fairs.

The Global Schoolhouse and Singapore Education initiatives may be viewed as calculated, strategic moves on the part of the Singapore government to carve out a slice of the lucrative world education market pie. With the world education market estimated at US$2.2 trillion (Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore), and 3 million students purportedly enrolled outside the country of their citizenship

(OECD 2009), it is no wonder that Singapore and other Asian countries such as Malaysia, South Korea, and Taiwan would view the global education market as the next frontier.

SINGAPORE'S REPORT CARD SO FAR

Even though competition has been heating up within the Asia-Pacific region as countries scramble to grab a piece of the diminishing pie, Singapore seems to have established a strong foothold.

Three cases in point: firstly, in 2007, there were 86,000 foreign students from 120 nationalities studying in the city-state (Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore). A year later in 2008, newspaper reports claimed that the foreign student population had hit 97,000 (*The New Paper*, May 20, 2009).

By all news accounts, Singapore's foreign student population has been increasing, save for a small dip in 2009 when the slight economic downturn saw multinational corporations recalling their expatriate hires who, in turn, pulled their children out of the international schools in Singapore. That same year, news reports of errant private school operators closing down and leaving foreign students in the lurch without their degrees and school fees also put a dent on Singapore's image as a quality education destination (*The Sunday Times*, March 1, 2009). The Singapore parliament moved quickly to pass the Private Education Act and, with the establishment of the Council of Private Education in 2010 to regulate the private education industry, industry observers and education operators expect the international student enrollment numbers to climb once again.

Anticipating growing enrollments over the next few years, private education providers are already stepping up their investments in new buildings and facilities. In particular, INSEAD has announced plans to expand its campus by adding a new building (*The Business Times*, October 25, 2010), while Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS) is investing S$100 million in a new administrative wing and a 15-storey hostel at its main campus (*The Straits Times*, October 29, 2010). The hostel, which cost MDIS S$80 million, has the capacity to house 1,600 students. It opens its doors in January 2011.

Secondly, after Singapore announced its intention in 1997 to attract ten world-class universities to set up campuses across the island by 2007, it was said to have surpassed the target two years ahead of time. Today, 16 well-known universities from around the world such as James Cook University (Australia), INSEAD (Europe), University of Chicago's School of Business (U.S.A.), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (U.S.A.), and New York University's Tisch School of the Arts (U.S.A.) have either set up a campus in Singapore, or are offering their degrees through partnerships with local institutes of higher learning such as public universities National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU), or private education providers like Singapore Institute of Management-Global Education (SIM-GE), Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS), and PSB Academy. And that number continues to climb, with Yale University currently in talks with NUS to jointly develop a liberal arts college. These foreign universities are typically courted by the Economic Development Board with offers of attractive monetary and in-kind support through packages that included reduced land values, research funding, soft loans, and fast-tracked employment visas (Olds 2009).

Thirdly, the contribution of the education sector to Singapore's GDP has doubled over the span of just five years: from 1.9% (or S$3 billion) in 2002, to 3.8% (or S$8 billion) in 2007 (*The Straits Times*, May 12, 2010).

So, what are some of the key factors for Singapore's success?

It all seems to come down to: (1) articulating a clear goal; (2) having a holistic picture of the education industry and how the different segments fit together; (3) putting in place a masterplan that identifies and coordinates the necessary initiatives and activities involving secondary stakeholders[1]; (4) creating the necessary pull factors through a concerted effort and partnerships that involve primary stakeholders such as institutes of higher learning (both private and public education providers) and individuals (students and educators), and secondary stakeholders such as government agencies (e.g., Singapore Economic Development Board and Singapore Tourism Board), as well as public government support (through media reports, funding, tax incentives to foreign universities, etc.); and (5) putting in place mechanisms that not only enhance Singapore's image as a destination country for international students, highly skilled professionals, and multinational corporations, but also measures that ensure and assure the maintenance of the requisite standards for quality education[2].

To understand why this single-minded move to attract international students was spearheaded by government entities and has received strong government support, we need to take into account the historical and social factors that led to Singapore's phenomenal economic growth and development since it became an independent state in 1965.

'UNIQUELY SINGAPORE' CHARACTERISTICS

Singapore is an island nation with little-to-no natural resources. In fact, its leaders have always emphasized that human resource is the country's only widely available resource and one of the main pillars of the economy (Sanderson 2002). In addition, foreign direct investment

and multinational corporations have also been principal driving forces. As a result, the city-state has always practiced a liberal open-door policy with regard to immigration, which also stems from its migrant history. The government also takes a pragmatic view towards immigration, noting that foreign professionals, foreign labour, and foreign direct investments have contributed much towards the island's economic development – and will continue to do so.

To further raise Singapore's attractiveness to foreign direct investors and competitiveness in the global economy, the English language was adopted as one of the four official languages in the 1960s – the other three being Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. English is also the main language of instruction in the local schools and institutions of higher learning. Earlier politicians, notably Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and the late Dr Goh Keng Swee, strongly believed that an English-educated workforce was imperative to creating a conducive and attractive environment not only for multinational corporations to set up their operations on the island, but also for expatriates and highly skilled individuals to move to Singapore for work commitments and, hopefully, stay on and build their families and homes.

Moreover, the leaders also believed that skills upgrading, vocational training, and higher education are essential in ensuring Singapore's competitive edge in the global economy. And as Singapore's experience has shown, the city-state's early leaders' foresight and singular vision have indeed paid dividends.

In recent years, the government has also consciously implemented policies to enhance Singapore's attractiveness to geographically mobile professionals. In particular, Singapore has chalked up a reputation as a global city, and one of the top choices for the young, geographically mobile professionals.

In the Worldwide Quality of Living survey conducted by Mercer last year, Singapore topped the list as the most livable city in Asia (*The Straits Times*, April 29, 2009). Among the main draws? Its world quality infrastructure, high quality housing, and good local and international schools and universities.

The government has also managed to turn its unattractive image as a stickler for rules and regulations around to its advantage. In particular, many parents as well as international students cite the city-state's squeaky-clean image, general safety in public places, and strong emphasis on Asian values as some of the major considerations that tipped the balance in Singapore's favor.

This unique blend and fusion of modern, vibrant city living intertwined with a wholesome image and conservative values is what makes Singapore particularly attractive to students around the region. Singapore is seen as having the best of both worlds: a Western outlook, yet steeped in Asian culture.

Additionally, the city-state's success in ensuring racial and religious harmony among its different ethnicities makes it all the more attractive to foreign immigrants who come from various parts of the world, bringing with them their own religions, cultural practices, and languages. Although intergroup conflict may inevitably occur, the Singapore government takes a hard line against individuals and activities that are deemed to incite racial and religious hatred and conflict. This stems from historical incidents of racial and religious riots that resulted in fatal casualties in the 1950s and 1960s – incidents that the Singapore government is adamant must never occur again. In view of this, the city-state's leaders have time and again reiterated the founding vision of Singapore as a multicultural society.

Local media reports often carry speeches, messages, and interviews with Singapore's leaders that reinforce this message of multiculturalism, and encourage acceptance and incorporation of the different groups of people into the larger Singapore society. With Singapore actively recruiting international professionals, such frequent public exhortation to uphold the vision of social harmony, cohesion, and integration is extremely important. These public messages not only orientate members of the host society towards adopting a pluralistic outlook, but also smooth the way for new immigrants eager to acculturate to the new host country.

As psychologist John W. Berry pointed out, "acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological changes that involve various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to some longer-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between both groups" (Berry 2005, 699). These dynamic mutual adaptations are set in motion at the very first contact between the two cultural groups – the host society and its members, and the immigrant cultural groups and their individual members – which inevitably lead to changes to institutional and cultural practices, as well as individual behaviors that take place long after the initial contact (Berry 2005).

IMMIGRANTS' PROPENSITY TO ACCULTURATE

The host society's general response and orientation towards immigration and pluralism – that is, whether it encourages or seeks to eliminate diversity – is reflected in its members' attitude and behavior towards newcomers (Murphy 1965). As Murphy (1965) noted, societies that encourage diversity tend to be more open to immigration and immigrants, making the environment more conducive for individuals who wish to settle down there. Such societies are likely to be more multicultural in outlook, rather than eschew an assimilationist approach that requires immigrants to conform to their way of life.

Scholars of intergroup relations also observe that host societies typically adopt one of the following four orientations toward immigration and pluralism:

(1) multiculturalism;[3]
(2) melting pot;[4]
(3) segregation;[5] and
(4) exclusion.[6]

Host members' attitude and behavior toward newcomers inevitably impact the acculturation strategy adopted by immigrant groups and their individual members, and whether these immigrants choose to be reactive or proactive in their relationships with host members.

In his 2005 article, Berry noted that there are generally four types of acculturation strategies adopted by newcomers that stem from two considerations that immigrants make when deciding on the extent to which they should acculturate. The two considerations are: (1) the extent to which the newcomers seek to maintain their heritage culture and identity; and (2) the extent to which the newcomers seek to participate in the host society and prefer contact with host members, compared to their own cultural groups.

The four acculturation strategies generally adopted by newcomers are:

(1) integration;[7]
(2) assimilation;[8]
(3) separation;[9] and
(4) marginalization.[10]

Each of the four strategies corresponds closely with one of the four types of host society responses outlined above. In particular, Berry and his colleagues found that immigrant groups and their members tend to integrate when they settle down in a host society that upholds multiculturalism. Similarly, immigrants tend to assimilate when they move to a host society that strongly believes in the melting pot ideal. However, in societies where immigrants face discrimination and exclusion, they tend to adopt the acculturation strategies of separation and marginalization respectively.

PRELIMINARY SURVEY FINDINGS: SURVEY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN SINGAPORE

In April 2010, I surveyed 178 international students at a private education provider in Singapore, to determine their perception of Singaporeans and Singapore students. The survey instrument also incorporated Berry's 16-question scale.

Initial findings indicate that international students in Singapore generally do not feel discriminated against by Singaporeans and Singaporean students. However, the respondents also agree that Singaporeans:

(i) expect them to learn and adopt the Singaporean way of life;
(ii) expect them to learn English and be competent in the use of English as a mode of communication; and
(iii) are generally not receptive of immigrants.

The above results suggest that international students feel that Singaporeans prefer immigrants to assimilate into Singapore society. This perception may stem from media reports and blogs at the time that highlighted Singaporean parents' and students' displeasure and uneasiness over the presence of foreign students, especially in the public universities. Because Singaporeans largely view university education as an essential foundation to a bright future, local parents worry that their children are being edged out of publicly funded local universities, where tuition fees are relatively affordable, as they are heavily subsidized by the Singapore government[11] (Davie, *The Straits Times*, June 1, 2008). And this displeasure may be displayed at the individual level, where local and international students interact.

In his online article, NUS undergraduate Irvin Tan quoted a second year sophomore at the university as saying:

> *"All these foreigners do not have to take on extra responsibilities while living on campus. All they need to do is study, study and study, while we as local students have to spend time juggling extracurricular activities and school in order to chalk up the vital points for on-campus accommodation. With the amount of time they have, it's not such a surprise that they do well! We need more than 24 hours in a day if we really want to compete with them." (www.funkygrad.com)*

Moreover, Tan also noted that "most students feel that the foreigners tend to 'mingle among themselves' during lessons, at school functions and events. Therefore how well foreign students can assimilate into our society is a big doubt (*sic*)" (www.funkygrad.com).

Factor analysis of Berry's 16-question scale incorporated in the survey showed that the factors associated to the indicators of acculturation strategies of assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization were significant; the Cronbach test also showed the scale to have sufficient reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.7).

In addition, the survey found that international students in Singapore generally favor the acculturation strategy of integration. This finding lends support to Berry's assertion that immigrant ethnocultural groups tend to adopt the acculturation strategy of integration – that is, maintaining the immigrant group's heritage culture and identity, while seeking to build relationships with other groups in society – when the larger (host) society (in this

case, Singapore) embraces multiculturalism in intergroup relationships. Given the Singapore government's emphasis on multiculturalism and the city-state's open door policy with regard to immigration, we could posit that the population generally accepts multiculturalism as the way of life in Singapore.

Interestingly, international students somewhat disagree that immigrants such as themselves should assimilate – that is, that they should forgo their own heritage culture and identity while seeking to build relationships with other groups in society. This may be due to the international students' perception that the Singapore society strongly adheres to the principle of multiculturalism in general, due to the frequent public exhortations by the city-state's leaders. Interestingly, these very same students also perceive Singaporeans to prefer immigrants to assimilate into the Singaporean culture.[12] This could possibly stem from local media reports over the past year, where Singaporeans have expressed their unhappiness over the use of Chinese as a language of communication by immigrant service staff. In particular, Singaporeans feel that immigrants should endeavor to learn and use English in their daily communication as it is the common language of communication among the various ethnic groups in Singapore. Such public expressions may have led the international students' to conclude that Singaporeans are generally not receptive of immigrants.

CONCLUSION

Singapore's success in drawing international students to its shores appears to have been a case of "build it and they will come." However, as discussed above, Singapore's seemingly effortless achievement really stems from meticulous planning, and close collaboration and coordination of efforts between the primary and secondary stakeholders. In this aspect, the Singapore government has played a key role in ensuring that necessary conditions for the conducive environment is created through land grants, tax breaks, and matching funds, so that world-class universities would be attracted to setting up campuses in Singapore and contribute to Singapore's image as a quality education destination.

Singapore's reputation for quality education is one of the main pull factors that has drawn international students to the city-state. The other is the presence of 7,000 multinational corporations that form a large pool of potential employers after these students graduate. Singapore's liberal immigration policy, openness to immigrants, and multicultural society also make it relatively easier for international students to acculturate, as it takes away much of the anxiety that these international students may feel about moving to a new community. Additionally, parents of international students are also drawn by Singapore's good public safety record and reputation as Asia's most livable city.

What makes Singapore's experience unique is, perhaps, the relative success its education sector has enjoyed, despite the looming presence of the government. Contrary to conventional wisdom that a large government presence tends to crowd out participation by private interests, Singapore's experience has showcased the benefits of government presence and support in the education industry. And the city-state has also shown by example that it is possible to find the right blend and balance between private and public interests, and to foster close collaboration between primary and secondary stakeholders. Ultimately, these concerted efforts are vital to Singapore's ability to move decisively towards its goal of becoming a quality education destination for international students.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Secondary stakeholders would be entities that have an indirect impact on the education industry. These could include, for example, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Immigration and Customs Authority (ICA) that are responsible for immigration policy, screening of immigrants (in this case, international students) and the process for issuing of student visas. Such an endeavor would require the Ministry of Education and the various private and public education institutes to work closely with these two stakeholders.

[2] Following a spate of complaints and media reports about errant private school operators, the Singapore parliament passed the Private Education Act that requires private education providers to meet several criteria before they can be registered with the Ministry of Education, and receive the EduTrust certification that serves as an endorsement of the quality of education services provided by the institute. This EduTrust certification allows the institute to recruit international students (*The Straits Times*, September 15, 2009). The Act also made provisions for a Council of Private Education to act as a watchdog and regulator of private education operators.

[3] A multicultural society respects the newcomers' cultural practices and do not require them to change culturally in order to be accepted by the host members.

[4] A host society that adheres to the melting pot ideal respects the newcomers' cultural practices and does not require them to change culturally in order to be accepted by the host members.

[5] A host society that segregates is one where newcomers are not treated on par with host members and are made to live and work in designated areas, which inevitably lead to the formation of ethnic enclaves.

[6] A host society that adopts an exclusionist approach towards newcomers is generally unwelcoming of immigrants and usually sidelines and ignores them.

[7] Immigrants who prefer to integrate tend to maintain their group's culture, while also participating in activities in the host society and interacting with host members;

[8] Immigrants who assimilate would replace their group's heritage culture and identity with the host culture and identity, and participate in host society activities and interacting with members of the host society.

[9] Immigrants who adopt the acculturation strategy of separation would maintain their heritage culture and identity and keep themselves apart from the host society and its members.

[10] Immigrants who react by marginalizing themselves have no interest in maintaining the their heritage culture and identity, and show little interest in interacting with host members or participating in host society activities.

[11] Singaporean students enjoy more than 70% government subsidies on their tuition fees – which means that local students only pay 30% of the full university tuition fees (Davie, *The Straits Times*, June 1, 2008). Prior to August 2008, foreign students only paid a 10% premium over local tuition fees – which works out to a pithy 33% of the full university tuition fees.

[12] Berry found that the acculturation strategy of assimilation tends to be present in societies that embrace the principle of melting pot – that is, where the immigrant groups are expected to adopt the host culture in order to be accepted by members of the larger (host) society.