

# International Education Hub : History, Policies and Economic Factors Contributing to Singapore's Success

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# **International Education Hub: History, Policies and Economic Factors Contributing to Singapore's Success**

Jonathan Aleles

## **Introduction**

Richard Nixon had once speculated that had Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, lived in another era or location, he might have “attained the world stature of a Churchill, a Disraeli, or a Gladstone” (Zakaria, 1994). Lee Kuan Yew, born in 1923, was the Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959-1990. Lee and the People's Action Party (PAP), leadership mainly comprised of English-educated multi ethnics, led Singapore with a GNP in 1965 that was equal to Chile, Argentina and Mexico. Singapore's GNP is now higher than Great Britain, hosts the world's busiest port, and is a hub of global manufacturing and service industries. Singapore has gone from a poverty stricken state to a City-State that is now a thriving wealthy hub of innovation, business and education driven by strategic political policies targeted at economic development.

Singapore, a tiny country with a landmass of 687 square kilometers, very few natural resources, and a heavy reliance on water, food and energy imports, appears to be a most unlikely place where economic developed could thrive. However, in the 1960s, Prime Minister Lee and his government began the development-drive ideology in various sectors that they believed to possess the greatest potential for growth that would lead to national goals (Gopinathan, 1997b, p.588).

## **Influence of Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew**

Lee Kuan Yew's personal experience in international education is in essence what the current educational system in Singapore represents. Born into a Chinese cultural system but later “westernized through upbringing and education” within an English-speaking school (Minchin, 1990, p.ix). He later earned

a law degree from Cambridge University as an international student from 1946-1949 (Tamney, 1996, p.3). More than ten years later in the 1960s, he “visited Briton’s Easton, some of its North American equivalents and even certain schools in Eastern Europe” (Minchin, 1990, p, 259). To further his knowledge of how higher education system operated, he went on a sabbatical in 1968, after nine years in office as Prime Minister “to get some fresh ideas and reflect on the future”, and also “learned much about American society and economy” (Lee, K.Y. 2000, p.73). Quite obviously these experiences are not common among most Singaporeans, but Lee Kuan Yew had a vision of what education system was needed for Singapore to evolve into a world-class economy using the most their most treasured human resources.

### **Relationship Between Education and Business**

The success of Singapore lies in the government’s early realization that human resources would be its foundation to build upon in order to form a strong economy. Subsequently, dedication was made in the 1960s to develop the human resource potential through investment in education and vocational training (Bercuson, 1995). In 2001, the Economic Review Committee (ERC) was established during Singapore’s evolving economic position. At that time, the ERC was commissioned to review the development strategy of Singapore while investigating methods to transform and revive the economy. Education development as it relates to business was once again a primary focus. This early investment steered the education system in a direction which now encompasses primary, secondary and tertiary sectors providing “human resources to meet the country’s imperative for an educated and skilled workforce” and inculcate sound moral values in the face of rapid progress and change” (Ministry of Information & the Arts, 1998, p.206).

The Singaporean government’s policies related to education have always been proactive in nature with the central goal of understanding what future economic requirements might exist. Primary education in Singapore, as dictated by policies, would indoctrinate a “love of Singapore” in the youth while secondary and tertiary education would be developed and “planned in terms of projected economic growth and manpower requirements” (Tan, O.S. 1996, p 23). In the

1980s, significant investment was made in post-secondary institutions such as polytechnics and universities (Gopinathan, 1997a, pp.36-38).

As pointed out by Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhart, and Terra (2000), universities around the world have been moving from a traditional institution of higher learning, educational providers and scientific knowledge creators to a more “entrepreneurial” university model. This new entrepreneurial type of institution combines the role of the commercialization of knowledge while actively contributing to private enterprises. The system is now best viewed by using the analogy of a “Triple-Helix nexus involving close interaction with government institutions and private industries” (Wong, Ho, and Singh, 2007).

### **Expansion of International Education and The Global Schoolhouse**

The number of international students has grown rapidly since 2003. Although no concrete statistics could be found, it was estimated that 50,000 international students were enrolled at universities in Singapore in 2002 (The Financial Express, 2010). In 2006, the number jumped to roughly 80,000 (The Financial Express, 2010). This rapid spike is attributed to the Global Schoolhouse Program, a government initiative for “global institutional composition and global student mix through a wide range of educational offerings distinguished by quality and relevance to a changing world” (Sidhu, 2005).

The foundation of the Global Schoolhouse Project is formed by three general strategies. The first underlying strategy is to attract world-class universities (WCU) to establish bases in Singapore. As outlined by the Singapore Economic Development Board (SEDB), attracting world-class institutions to Singapore will undoubtedly bring in more students from Asia, attract more foreign talent, promote the intellectual and education quality of Singapore and create industry-university links to enhance the potential for commercialization of new technologies and industries (SEBD, 1998). The conception of this education-commercial-industrial system is aimed at advancing fields such as medicine, engineering, creative industries and applied sciences. The second strategy of the Global Schoolhouse Project is to recruit 150,000 students by 2015 (University World News, 2008). Thirdly, it is the aspiration of the Global Schoolhouse Project for local universities to create more of an American type of entrepre-

neurial mentality while building local and private higher education opportunities. These three facets of the Global Schoolhouse Program are working toward general policies of the Singaporean government at rapidly embracing internationalization.

Governmental agencies play a role in the daily operations of the Global Schoolhouse Project. The main functions are lead by the Ministry of Trade and Industry; the Economic Development Board and the Singapore Tourist Board (STB) conduct most functions. The Economic Development Board dictates the overall strategy while the tourist board is mainly concerned with marketing. It appears rather unusual that the STB is involved with an educational undertaking, but this organization has a far-reaching network of international offices located in target markets that can be utilized to reach Singapore's educational recruiting efforts.

Main source countries for international students into Singapore are China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, and Vietnam, within the past few years; efforts have been developing to bring a more diverse population of students originating from Myanmar, the Philippines, and the Middle East (Rubin, 2008).

The Singaporean government allocates substantial amounts of time and money (information on monetary amounts are unavailable) to advertise its higher education system to the rest of the world. This proactive approach, spearheaded by the STB, actively engages in education fairs and media campaigns. In addition to these widely used practices, the STB trains and hires hundreds of Educational Specialist, these are foreign students that are qualified and certified to promote higher education in Singapore. As of 2007, approximately 260 specialists were stationed in eleven geographic markets (Rubin, 2008).

Of the 22 worldwide offices run by the STB, Educational Specialists are housed in 14 different offices. For example, a prospective applicant in Ho Chi Minh City can gain easy access to information about Singapore's educational environment from their peers that have already lived and studied in Singapore. These initial contacts with a peer provide a truly authentic firsthand account of what life is really like as an international student in Singapore.

### **Financial Assistance and Tuition Grants**

One crucial and unique element of international student programs in Singapore is the government subsidy scheme. The Ministry of Education, Singapore (MOE) provides Tuition Grants (TG) for students enrolled at any of the three public universities, five polytechnics, and two private art schools which cover a substantial portion of the full tuition fees to eligible students. Students who receive the tuition grant are required to pay only the subsidized tuition fee.

This remains a popular choice for international students due to the affordability of the top quality education in Singapore. If students choose to accept the grants from the MOE, there are specific guidelines that must be agreed prior to accepting the grants. International students who receive the tuition grants are required to sign the MOE Tuition Grant Agreement and will be bonded to work in any Singapore-registered company based overseas or in Singapore for 3 years upon graduation. After this three-year obligation has been satisfied, international students are not required to pay the grant. However, if this requirement is not satisfied, the Grant must be paid back in full (Ministry of Education, Singapore).

The rationale for offering these generous grants is to attract and keep the brainpower-the only natural resource in Singapore. The Singaporean government developed this system of offering quality education for a low cost to attract and keep talented and skilled individuals to boost and support its economy. It can be said that it is the hope of the Singaporean government that once a graduate from a university in Singapore completes his/her three-year commitment to work for a Singaporean company that he/she will remain in Singapore and eventually settle in Singapore. The government of Singapore encourages professionals to stay on and makes obtaining a working visa very easy. Singapore is interested in skilled and talented professionals; people who have something to offer Singapore most often find the transition into Singapore flawless and stress free. Singapore has reduced the bureaucratic red tape that most other countries have related to the process of admitting foreign nationals.

### **Singapore as an Attractive Destination for International Students**

There are several factors attributed to Singapore's success of recruiting in-

ternational students. A key element when an international student decides where to study is the quality and reputation on the institution of higher learning. As of 2012, National University of Singapore ranked 25<sup>th</sup> in world and 2<sup>nd</sup> in Asia (QS World University Rankings). Singapore's other premier university, Nanyang Technological University ranks 47<sup>th</sup> globally (QS World University Rankings). These two universities share a large percentage of the overall enrollment of international students in Singapore. The importance of academic reputation in student decision-making is a paramount factor (Mazzarol, 2002). In a 2010 survey of international students at National University of Singapore (NUS), the 'reputation of the university' topped the nine attributes listed with 72.4% of international students selecting that as being the deciding factor in the decision making process (Sidhu, Ho, Yeoh, 2010). Reputation is interconnected with the teaching and training, and the access to well resourced research facilities as reported by Sidhu, Ho and Yeoh. Other key attributes found in the survey conducted by Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh were university financial support (61.3%), English education (42.7%), training that would eventually lead to good job prospects (35.7%), international curriculum (25.8%), and a relatively low tuition (24.6%). The 61.3% that mentioned university financial support viewed the ease of obtaining scholarships, tuition grants (as mentioned previously), and loans as a key factor.

Academic reasons are not the only considerations international students have when deciding where to study. Attributes of the host country also play a fundamental part of the decision-making process. In a separate study conducted by Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh in 2010 of international students at NUS, found that 58.9% attribute their decision to the safe environment found in Singapore. Getting a prospective job in Singapore also ranked high (37.5%).

Back in the 1960s, when Lee Kuan Yew embarked on his 40-year term as the Prime Minister of Singapore as head of the People's Action Party, he faced a fragile and uncertain future as Singapore had a weak economy, third-world infrastructure, and a largely uneducated workforce. The government's proactive development-driven ideologies have transformed Singapore into a country with a powerful economy, world-class institutions of higher learning and an exceptional high standard of living.

## Conclusion

Singapore's efforts to form its economy into a knowledge-based economy have created policies like the Global Schoolhouse Project to further promote its universities and build crucial relationships with many leading western institutions. In essence, Singapore is propagating its human capital to propel itself into the ever-expanding age of globalization. Governmental policies together with the needs of private enterprise and the commercialization of knowledge offered by Singapore's institutions of higher education are facilitating Singapore's determination to be the leading international 'educational hub'. The attributes of Singapore as a livable destination for study or permanent residence further support the overall entrepreneurial model Singapore is fostering. Singapore's characteristics are truly exceptional and unique. In the current age of international higher education as an industry, Singapore is at the forefront of this competitive industry. Other global international education destinations should look to Singapore as a template for how to integrate higher education with industry and government. As it relates to Japan, the Japanese Ministry of Education should research and attempt to adopt some of the policies and strategies found in Singapore's education system. If effective measures are implemented, Japan has a chance at enticing and attracting more international students to study at its leading institutions of higher education. Further research should be conducted to effectively correlate the current situation of the Global 30 Program in Japan to model after Singapore's success, which will eventually help Japan to reach its goal of attracting 300,000 international students by 2020.

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