

CLASS ACT

Passion drives secretary-general R Theyvendran and the board at MDIS, where every dollar earned is reinvested into the school's infrastructure, curriculum development and expansion plans **BY MINDY TAN**

THERE is a certain irreverence about the puppet master behind the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS). You must excuse me, I have a quick tongue, he says, at one point in the interview. His minders have, at this point, ceased to try and rein him in. Nothing escapes the path of R Theyvendran, secretary-general at MDIS – politics, race, religion. But his manner belies how seriously he takes his calling. It is, after all, passion that drives him and the board at MDIS, Singapore's not-for-profit professional institution where board members are not paid salaries nor dividends, and every dollar earned is reinvested into the school's infrastructure, curriculum development and expansion plans.

The Stirling Road campus where we sit down with Dr Theyvendran is a blend of bold colours and quotations about leadership and ethics that grab at you from every corner of the campus. It is a campus that is not afraid to leave its mark and well defines the leadership style of Dr Theyvendran.

He is clearly proud of it – lamenting that we did not have an opportunity to see the campus before the interview, to better appreciate his references to the many statues that grace the grounds. During the campus tour after, his ever-roving eye spots areas where the paint has chipped (just a little), and he is quick to draw the attention of his staff to it.

This attention to detail makes itself felt as he talks about the school's three overseas campuses. Indeed, it is with remarkable ease – considering how many boards he sits on – that he rattles off numbers, whether in terms of student enrolment, total capacity, or amount invested and of course, return on investment.

AN UNORTHODOX APPROACH

Much of MDIS and its approach is unorthodox. Its first move overseas, for instance, was to Tashkent, after the Uzbekistan government approached MDIS to set up an educational centre there to offer tertiary education to its students and other students from the Central Asia region.

“Uzbekistan was a sheer accident,” admits Dr Theyvendran, quite readily. But it is an investment that is paying off. From an initial student enrolment figure of 275 when the campus was first set up in 2008, the campus has reached full capacity, at over 2,200 students. In October last year, it held its fifth graduation ceremony, with about 500 students graduating.

Plans are already underway to expand the facilities at MDIST to accommodate another 3,000 students. Expansion plans include

the setting up of a financial training centre, multi-purpose hall and additional classroom facilities.

Meanwhile, the first phase of construction at its second overseas campus in Iskandar Malaysia is expected to be completed by this year. It will feature two student hostel blocks, a main building, an administrative building, a multi-purpose hall and a soccer cum cricket stadium. In the first phase alone, the campus is expected to support up to 2,000 students.

The institution's biggest challenge at the moment is India. Last year, MDIS announced that it will be setting up its third overseas campus in Chennai, India, in a joint venture with Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies. While it intended to have its first intake in October 2015, Dr Theyvendran says this has been postponed to later this year.

Students will be able to pursue a variety of programmes from diploma to master's in the field of business and management, subject to regulatory approvals. For the time being, MDIS India will operate out of Vels' premises. Construction for the new campus in Chennai, which is estimated to span 70,000 sq ft, will commence in July.

Even with his plate full, Dr Theyvendran is already actively looking for opportunities in Indonesia. “That's the way to get out from the competition. For Indonesia, the market is so big and, we want our students to have mixed cultural exposure.”

Part of the allure of its campus in India is that students are required to complete their semesters in both the Singapore and India campuses. This is something that Dr Theyvendran hopes to expand on with the establishment of a campus in Indonesia.

In April last year, MDIS acquired local training outfit Service Quality Centre (SQC) to complement its corporate training arm, the Management Development and Consultancy (MDC). SQC has a market presence in Indonesia in partnership with the Salim Group, Indonesia's biggest conglomerate with assets including Indofood Sukses Makmur, which is the world's largest producer of instant noodles, as well as a major player in sectors that include oil palm plantations, logging concessions, property development and the leisure industry.

For MDIS, the acquisition of the centre strengthens the professional institution's footprint in Indonesia, allowing it to enhance its student recruitment drive in the market. “In Indonesia, we recently acquired a service quality centre . . . They have 10 to 12 acres of land, so if we want to, we can set up a campus there,” adds Dr Theyvendran. But, while it is actively looking, the institution is in no hurry.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING,
GREENPLASTICSOLDIERS
GROOMING: ERNEST LIM
WARDROBE:
R THEYVENDRAN'S OWN

“WITH STIFFER COMPETITION, WE HAVE TO DIFFERENTIATE OURSELVES. AND WE'RE ALSO LOOKING AT OUR PRODUCTS TO MAKE SURE THE PRODUCTS ARE IN LINE WITH SINGAPORE'S GROWTH.”

– R Theyvendran,
secretary-general, MDIS



“WE CELEBRATED MANY SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS DESPITE THE SLOWING GLOBAL ECONOMY AND COMPETITION FROM THE GROWING PRIVATE EDUCATION SECTOR.”

– Dr Theyvendran



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

EYE ON THE FUTURE

Dr Theyvendran is planning to send MDIS staff for pedagogical training to ensure that lecturers continue to retain higher internal quality standards

“I’m not pushing it. Uzbekistan is a success story, and now we want to get Malaysia off next. With stiffer competition, we have to differentiate ourselves. And we’re also looking at our products to make sure the products are in line with Singapore’s growth.”

WIDENING ITS BASE

As part of its acquisition of SQC, MDIS also invested S\$1.2 million in the renovation of its Dhoby Ghaut campus, which will house both MDC and SQC, which was previously located at Singapore Post Centre in Eunos. Beyond enhancing existing facilities, three concept rooms will be added to facilitate SQC’s courses.

“We believe we have a niche offering in the sector with our customised training programmes, seminars and consultancy services,” says Dr Theyvendran. “With the acquisition of a brand with strong track records and client base, we are confident that we can provide professionals and organisations with the holistic corporate training solutions necessary to elevate their business to the next level.”

It is a decisive step into consultancy – its corporate training arm focuses mainly on public seminars and short courses while the newly acquired SQC caters more to government clients.

“We are moving more aggressively in the consultancy area which will form the alternative income. If, on the academic side, something does happen, the alternative income will keep MDIS going.”

Another project that the organisation has up its sleeve is the introduction of modular courses ranging from ‘Be a Microbial Crime Scene Investigator’, ‘Fashion Drawing for Merchandising’, ‘Create a Fashion Portfolio’ and ‘The Art of Fermentation: Brewing and Wine Making’.

This is designed to provide flexibility for the working population who might be keen to upgrade themselves, and is in line with the country’s SkillsFuture push.

Also ever on the lookout to ensure that his own teachers meet his high standards, Dr Theyvendran is planning to send relevant MDIS staff for pedagogical training to ensure that lecturers continue to retain higher internal quality standards.

This will be a busy year for MDIS as it celebrates its 60th year, and marches forward with its battery of upgrades and updates. Indeed, what keeps the institution one step ahead of the private education sector is its strong foundation and core competencies that it established since 1956 and continues to fine-tune.

“We celebrated many significant achievements despite the slowing global economy and competition from the growing private education sector,” Dr Theyvendran notes. “MDIS’s vigilant monitoring system ensures that only moderate risk investments are undertaken and key performance indicators are implemented to ensure adequate returns from its investments.”

While the school may be the oldest not-for-profit private institute in Singapore, within is a young heart, as evidenced in the vibrant colours that dots its campus.

And with Dr Theyvendran still as passionately at the helm as he was the day he came to the institution and turned it around from a loss-making institution to one that is firmly in the black – MDIS is able to meet all its financial obligations and engage in overseas investment projects and acquisition deals without incurring any debt – it looks like the road ahead may be a long one yet. ■