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An academy for all ages

PSB Academy, once a govt training department, today draws 7,500 students and 25,000 executives yearly,
says CHUANG PECK MING, THE BUSINESS TIMES

FROM seven to 70 - that's the age band that education provider PSB Academy aims to cater to. It's wide enough to cover anything from primary school to doctorate programmes - and Henry Heng, chief executive officer of TuV SuD PSB Corporation - owner of the academy - is mighty proud of it.



We provide courses covering cradle to life, which makes us different,' he says. 'Very few other private education providers in Singapore have this capability.'

That capability comes partly from the fact that PSB Academy was once a training agency belonging to the government, which has huge resources to back its growth.

Study and play: PSB Academy's Life Sciences laboratory (above) and team building activities

PSB Academy started in the early 1970s as a training department in the National Productivity Board (NPB) to address the shortage of basic

courses for workers to upgrade their skills. The training department was upgraded to the Management Services and Supervisory Development Division in NPB in 1981 to help companies boost productivity through the training of their managers and supervisors.

Seven years later, it was elevated to the Institute for Productivity Training equipped with a pool of associate trainers and professionals devoted to the delivery, running and marketing of an expanded portfolio of training courses. The institute was renamed PSB Institute for Productivity Training in 1996, with the formation of the Singapore Productivity and Standards Board.

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- Henry Heng
CEO of TuV SuD
PSB Corporation ,



It was given the major task of pushing for manpower development as Singapore moved up the economic ladder, demanding more creativity and thinking skills. The institute took on a new identity in April 2001 as PSB Academy, under the wing of a corporatised PSB Corporation.

The government no longer owns PSB Academy, but that is no handicap to the academy. Free of the government's involvement and left to fend for itself, the academy has in fact grown in the past five years into one of Singapore's largest training providers, whose reach extends as far as China and the Middle East.

In any case PSB Academy still has a financially strong backer: PSB Corp was bought over for \$124 million in April this year by Germany's TuV SuD, the world's third largest service provider of technical services relating to product quality, safety testing, management system certification, training and engineering consultation.

According to Mr Heng, its German parent, with sales over \$2 billion a year, wants PSB Academy to be an Asia-Pacific player in education, training and consultancy services.

PSB Academy is already a sizable education provider in the region. It currently has three campuses in Singapore, located at Science Park, Toa Payoh and Henderson.

Most of the programmes - bachelor, post-graduate degrees and diplomas in international business, marketing, finance, accounting, management, public relations, journalism and hospitality management - are offered at the Toa Payoh Campus. Information technology, engineering and life sciences programmes are offered at the Henderson Campus.

Many of these courses are conducted in partnership with renowned tertiary institutions overseas, like the University of Nottingham in the UK; the University of Western Australia and the University of Newcastle in Australia; and the California State University, Long Beach, in the US.

The courses are internationally recognised and accredited by, among others, the University of Cambridge International Examinations and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. PSA Academy is awarded the Singapore Quality Class for Private Education Organisations and ISO 9001:2000.

The academy also runs schools and campuses in China, Indonesia and Vietnam. Mr Heng says it is also looking to set up - in the next year or two - in promising markets like the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East and India, where TuV SuD has a testing centre.

Mr Heng says not many Singapore education providers are found outside the country. It's a mid to long-term commitment, according to him. And it takes a lot to understand local needs and to gain the confidence of the foreign students and their parents.

'(But) we have to be in the region to tap their needs,' he says. 'The developing countries are developing fast and there is a shortage of schools.'

PSB Academy, which has some 400 staff, is aiming to grow into a \$100 million a year education provider. It is already drawing 7,500 students and 25,000 executives yearly. It aims to hit 10,000 in the next few years, especially for diploma and degree courses.

Mr Heng also hopes to expand the number of international students to 3,000 by 2009. The international students currently come from 24 nations, from nearby countries in the region to Nigeria, Spain, France and the Netherlands. Enrolment is likely to step up after the year-end, when the academy moves into a new 26,500 square metre campus next to the Tiong Bahru MRT station.

Mr Heng sees education providers in Singapore facing 'quite stiff' competition from the Malaysians and Taiwanese, if they fail to protect the Singapore brand of excellence.

'We have to strengthen ourselves and extend our presence in the region,' he says. 'We can leverage the international students we have here, but there are also local challenges (in the markets we move into). We have to keep our reputation as providers of quality education.'

At the end of the day, Mr Heng says the acid test is whether students who graduated from Singapore's private schools and campuses can get a good job. 'That's where working with local authorities and local partners to tap their wisdom in dealing with local challenges comes in handy.'