

Ahead of the pack

Having led the Inti group through 16 years, its president Tan Yew Sing is now taking the brand international

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Tan Yew Sing subscribes to what he calls "the philosophy of the leopard". Leopards take their time to observe their prey before they attack, once they have decided on a target they move fast. In fact, leopards are one of the fastest animals on the planet, notes Tan. The amiable managing director of Inti Universal Holdings and president of Inti College Malaysia displays none of the leopard's ferocity, but he is certainly one of the fastest movers in the private education scene. "I make decisions very cautiously, once a decision is made, I move decisively and very resolutely. It is important to think and plan first, but to move without hesitation once you decide," says Tan. That's exactly what Tan has been doing since he founded the first Inti College 16 years ago in Brickfields, Lumpur, with a group of local investors. Inti College wasn't the first private college on the scene in Malaysia — Kolej Damansara Utama and Kolej Jaya Community College were there first — but once Tan

and his partners saw that there was a need for local private tertiary education, and found a way to meet that need via credit transfer programmes, they started Inti College. Tan, a UK-trained engineer with a Master's in Business Administration, was a developer then, but gave it all up to become the president of the college, and has never looked back.

Tan says he and his partners never anticipated that the private college business would become such a large industry, and viewed themselves as doing a service to the country.

"We wanted to provide quality education, to bring students overseas for twinning, we wanted to provide the social mobility for youngsters," he recalls.

Still, when it became clear that private education was becoming a growth industry, with the government's push to create a knowledge society bringing about more conducive policies for the development of private higher education, Tan and his partners decided to list Inti College on the Second Board of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE), under Inti Universal Holdings Bhd in 1996. Again, Inti wasn't

the first education business to be listed on the KLSE — Systematic Education Group Bhd and Stamford College Bhd beat Inti to it. But among the three education stocks, Inti has made the most of its listing status, has grown to be the largest and most profitable, and is by far the favourite among investors.

"Looking back it was a wise decision," says Tan. "Without listing we would never have gone so far." Since listing, the Inti group of colleges has established and acquired more branch campuses in and outside of Malaysia, including a spanking new main campus in Nilai, Negri Sembilan. Today, Inti College Malaysia is the largest private college in the country, with a network of five campuses and a student population of close to 13,000. In 2000, Inti Universal Holdings became the only education business to be listed on the KLSE's Main Board. Its turnover has grown from RM37.5 million in 1996 to RM142.6 million last year, and pre-tax profit has jumped from RM12 million in 1996 to RM34.6 million last year.

The Inti group is also way ahead of its Malaysian competitors in taking its business of private higher educa-



Tan: A nose for tapping private education needs within the region

tion overseas. Many private colleges have begun to recruit students from overseas markets such as China and Indonesia in recent years, but Inti has gone beyond that. As early as 1993, before the group was listed, Tan and some of his partners at Inti College Malaysia established Beijing Inti Management College, a joint venture with the Beijing Machinery Technical University. With two other overseas branches, one in Bangkok and the other in Jakarta, and its programmes franchised to associate institutions in Vietnam, Hong Kong and China, Inti is arguably the most internationalised local private education group. The Bangkok and Jakarta branches, in which Inti Universal Holdings has invested a total of about RM10 million, are expected to start contributing to the group's turnover with their first intake of students later this year.

And Tan has become a poster boy for the internationalisation of Malaysia's private higher education industry. It was Tan who accompanied the then Minister of Education Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak to China to sign an educational exchange agreement between Malaysia and China in 1997, which allowed Malaysian colleges to recruit students from China.

"I like to look at education as beyond national boundaries... especially now with the Asean Free Trade Agreement, with Asean as an economic entity become stronger," says Tan. He points out that other countries in the region have also realised the importance of private higher education in developing human resources, and if Malaysian private colleges don't take advantage of the emerging opportunities beyond Malaysia, others will step in.

"[After pioneering] twinning programmes in the mid-1980s, [Malaysian colleges] may have lost a little bit of steam," says Tan. He points out that other countries are coming up with new strategies to tap the region's private higher education market. For example, Singapore has attracted top universities from the US and Europe to establish branches on the island republic.

Even as competition heats up, new markets are opening up. Most notably, China is expected to come up with a new private education act this year, to increase private sector involvement in education. Tan is also exploring opportunities in the Arab countries. "After Sept 11, we have a big opportunity there," he says,

his trademark caution pre-

"We are very cautious about investment overseas," Inti has been invited to branch in one of the Arab countries. Tan says the group is still evaluating the proposal. "I find that have proper strategies of direct cash capital investment in countries, of building col-

Although the group works overseas where it feels it is while to do so, Inti's preference of expanding overseas for markets is still franchising. "So investment is worthwhile, franchising, as you don't use your resources," Tan explains.

In effect, Inti's strategy replicates the twinning model of American universities in that only it is Inti's 3+0 program that are being twinned.

"If we want to be a region of excellence for education we must be broad-minded just bringing the students also franchising to them, bringing them back to us for the first says Tan. "Expecting to get to come to me all the three-be more and more difficult, with the private education also growing in other countries.

Currently, Inti has about international students in its or about 17 per cent of its student population in the country group aims to increase this cent by 2005.

It's clear Tan has a nose for the opportunities that come from a growing need for higher education, not just in Malaysia, but throughout the region. It's not just about boosting the bottom line and the bottom line international students bring an international perspective to the Inti education, he points out, which is the quality of the Inti education.

"The education industry with conscience, we produce educated human beings as a commodity you can just throw away if it malfunctions," says Tan. "Private colleges fail in their catering the young, their products become a liability to society,

Despite Inti's commercial nature, Tan doesn't seem to have the good intentions that Inti started off with in 1986. "Inti's philosophy is to provide content education in an environment, deep-rooted in local culture," he says. This