
Secrets to the success of the world's fastest-rising university

Su Guanng, president emeritus of Nanyang Technological University, says the best universities have a local rival

June 17, 2017



By [Ellie Bothwell \(/author/ellie-bothwell\)](#)

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Young universities that wish to rapidly improve their research performance and establish themselves as leading global players could do well to look to Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

The fastest-rising young institution in the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, NTU has climbed 120 places between 2010-11 and 2016-17 to reach 54th place in the table (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/nanyang-technological-university#ranking-dataset/617475>).



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Su Guaning, former president of the university, said that its success was built on “looking for opportunities and seizing them”. NTU was, for example, quick to realise the significance of the “rise of China” and to take advantage, he told *THE*.

It was ahead of the curve on this front, launching training and degree programmes in Chinese in the 1990s, including a course aimed at teaching market-oriented economics to communist officials, Professor Su said.

The number of Chinese master’s programmes rose to six during his time as president, 2003 to 2011, he continued, which means that the institution now has a “whole [cohort] of alumni in China”.

Professor Su also focused heavily on “recruiting young people” when he became leader of the university, noting that “only in that way can you have something remaining [of the institution] when you retire or go elsewhere”.

Meanwhile, overhauling the institution’s tenure system to establish research strength as a key criterion and extending the retirement age from 55 to 65 was crucial, according to Professor Su.

“We basically had a teaching university structure. When I first came in, some of my colleagues told me that they were told by some of the seniors, ‘Don’t bother doing research, you’re wasting your time; just do your teaching and do well and have good life,’” he said. “You need to break out of constraints, otherwise you can burn all you want but the rocket will not take off.”

But, perhaps the most crucial factor contributing to Nanyang’s rapid success was Professor Su’s decision to appoint two deputies. One of these was Bertil Andersson, the current president, who became the university’s first provost in 2007 and was tasked with establishing the new tenure system.

A key distinction that worked in Professor Andersson’s favour during the hiring process was that as well as being chief executive of the European Science Foundation and former rector of Linköping University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/linkoping-university>) in Sweden, he had been a member and later chair of the Nobel Committee for Chemistry.

“So when he announces judgement on our tenure process, and says, ‘This guy passed, that guy did not’, it is very hard to challenge him. If he can judge the Nobel prize, I think he can judge tenure,” Professor Su said.

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When he first took the job at NTU, Professor Andersson joked that Europe “talks too much” about investing in universities and research, while Singapore “acts”. Last year, he admitted that his joke had in fact “become a reality”.

Professor Su also highlighted the benefits of having a senior leadership team in which staff have a similar vision for the institution but “quite different characters”.

“We complement each other and essentially we tried to operate as a whole,” he said, adding that this meant that there was “a continuum between my presidency” and Professor Andersson’s.

He added that the “hidden agenda” during his leadership was that “Singapore needs two universities of roughly competitive standing to do well” – the other, alongside NTU, being the National University of Singapore (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/national-university-of-singapore>).

“If you look around the world, the best universities usually have somebody competing with them on a similar level. If you take Stanford (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university#ranking-dataset/589595>), you have Berkeley (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-of-california-berkeley#ranking-dataset/589595>). Take Cambridge (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-of-cambridge#ranking-dataset/589595>), you have Oxford (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-of-oxford#ranking-dataset/589595>). Take Harvard (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/harvard-university#ranking-dataset/589595>), you have MIT (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/massachusetts-institute-of-technology#ranking-dataset/589595>),” he said.

NTU now has the “respect” to be seen as being on a similar level to NUS, said Professor Su, “so we are quite happy”.

ellie.bothwell@timeshighereducation.com (<mailto:ellie.bothwell@timeshighereducation.com>)

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