This paper examines the current policy of the Singaporean government to turn Singapore into an international tertiary educational hub for Asia. The major drive for this evolution is the economic contribution of students to the local economy, as well as attracting foreign talent to the island—one means to compensate the low current total fertility rate of 1.24 births per woman. Such an approach—viewing education as a tool to promote the economy—is not new, especially in the Singaporean context. Rather, the novelty resides in counting on a large pool of foreign students as a generator of wealth and turning education into a lucrative industry. According to the government agency, the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB): “70% of the demand for international higher education in 2025 is expected to come from Asia. What are you waiting for?” Likewise, a 2003 report by the Economic Review Committee stressed the “need to grow our services sector, to tap major new opportunities in Asia. We have to promote new, exportable services like healthcare, education and creative industries” as a tool to increase economic growth in the country.

Whereas the purpose of education is much broader—manpower training, nation-building, etc—advent global education must be viewed as a two-tiered system distinguishing local from foreign students:

Proposed strategy: A possible scenario would be to have a tiered system of universities. At the apex would be the World Class Universities... [which] would focus primarily on postgraduate education.... The next tier would be the existing universities NUS, NTU and SMU... providing the core of Singapore’s manpower needs, creating a regular talent pipeline of regional

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scholars, and providing education as a public good. The third tier would comprise additional private universities. These universities would focus on teaching and applied research. They would receive the bulk of the additional foreign student population. The universities could be foreign or local in origin, with their own campuses. Most of the international students would be paying full fees.4

This view has not evolved in a vacuum, but harks back to the recent past. In the mid-1980s the Economic Committee, directed by then Minister of State (Trade and Industry) BG Lee Hsien Loong, noted the role of education as an economic sector that could boost the local economy. Following such an assessment was the 1998 scheme by the EDB to attract at least 10 important universities to set up in Singapore. November 1998 saw the start of a collaboration between Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Singapore’s National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). A few months earlier, Johns Hopkins University had established Johns Hopkins Singapore to promote collaborative research and medical education.5

The 1997 financial crisis and the awakening of an economically powerful China have reinforced the trend to re-conceptualise education not only as a tool for the development of human capital, but also as a means to foster economic growth by tapping “the opportunities of emerging economies like China and India.”6 According to the expert Maryam Khelili, China and India are expected to be among the six richest countries in the world. If China’s annual economic growth stays at its current rate—more than 9%—by 2041, it will be the world’s top economic power (Ramonet, 2004: 1). Equally important, it is estimated that about 24,000 students leave India every year to study in foreign universities (UNESCO, 2003: 17). Consequently, as one local minister puts it, “China and India will be the countries to watch, as they are

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6 Economic Review Committee, “New Challenges, Fresh Goals—Towards a Dynamic Global City.”