

UK-Singapore: Partners In Science – Partners Of Choice

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Sitting in the British High Commission's S&T Office at the Biopolis, Singapore's state of the art biomedical sciences facility, it is difficult to imagine this was a greenfield site just three years ago. The Trade & Industry Select Committee visited shortly after the Biopolis opened. Seven buildings now house some 2000 researchers in government research institutes (RIs) and private companies such as GSK and Novartis. Many are already conducting world class research.

Singapore has been highly successful in attracting top researchers from all over the world including Sir David Lane from Dundee University and Yoshiaki Ito from Kyoto University. It is also funding a massive scholarship programme to nurture its own talent. The Agency for Science Technology and Research – A*STAR – which is spearheading Singapore's drive in the biomedical sciences, is funding 1000 students to the tune of £300k each so that they can study from BSc to PhD at top overseas universities, including selected British universities.

This new drive in the biomedical sciences complements Singapore's traditional research strengths in areas such as materials, microelectronics and manufacturing technologies. Learning from the success of the Biopolis, Singapore is creating a new centre – Fusionopolis – to bring together the RIs in the physical sciences so that they can be co-located with companies in one massive facility. The intention is to enable companies to benefit from the RIs' expertise and facilities. Training manpower is key and a constant flow of RI staff into companies is strongly encouraged.

Singapore is a small but important player on the world's research stage. It plans to increase research funding to 3% of GDP by 2010 and has

recently established a new National Research Foundation with £1.8 billion of funding for longer-term strategic research.

To succeed, Singapore knows it has to form partnerships with other countries. Whilst Singapore and the UK have had close historical links, Singapore has tended in recent years to look towards the US for its research collaborations. The S&T team at the British High Commission in Singapore was expanded in 2004 to ensure that opportunities for the UK were grasped, particularly as Singapore expands its research efforts into new areas of great importance to the UK, such as stem cell research and nanotechnology.

In November 2004, we launched a year-long UK-Singapore partners in science campaign to highlight the excellence of UK science and promote collaboration with Singapore. Launched by HRH The Duke of York at the Biopolis this campaign quickly proved to be a great success, comprising talks by leading UK scientists, exhibitions, competitions, workshops and joint activities with companies such as Rolls Royce, GSK and BAE Systems.

Such was its success that in July 2005 Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Lee Hsien Loong decided to convert the campaign into a long-term strategic initiative. They signed a statement on science, engineering and technology in which they agreed to encourage scientific collaborations and networks and help build scientific capacity with South East Asian Partners.

With funding from the FCO's Global Opportunities Fund, together with contributions from partners in Singapore and the UK, we have held workshops in areas such as materials, immunology, neuroscience, bioelectronics and chemistry. These have led to close



links and new collaborations between British and Singaporean researchers. Key researchers from other countries in South East Asia are invited to take part so that they can form links with UK and Singaporean researchers. Each workshop has been followed up with Collaboration Development Awards to enable researchers from the region to visit the UK to develop collaborations. Around 75 awards have so far been made leading to numerous collaborations.

In the latest stage of the UK-Singapore partnership, we jointly sponsored, with A*STAR, a conference in July 2006 on Scientific Capacity Building with South East Asian Partners. Representatives from ten countries in the region attended. The conference identified good practices and drew conclusions as to how capacity building can best be undertaken in the future. It provided policy-oriented inputs for decision-makers in South East Asia, the UK and multilateral fora, including the role science can play in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

But our work is not confined to promoting collaboration. We use science as a key diplomatic tool in promoting the UK-Singapore relationship and promoting British strategic interests. A good example was how we created a Sports Science and Engineering exhibition, visited by the Prime Minister and David Beckham, as a key element in our support for London's successful bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games.

We will continue to use science diplomacy as a key tool in promoting the UK's international strategic priorities.