



Local biomedical engineering start-up BioMers' (from left) Ms Karen Teo, Dr Mervyn Fathianathan and Dr Renuga Gopal at the firm's laboratory and manufacturing plant in Boon Lay last year. The success story behind the world's first translucent dental braces involves five people from three countries with shared university experiences, notes Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. ST FILE PHOTO

Bracing success story with local, foreign student mix

■ BY ANDREA ONG

FIVE people from three countries with shared university experiences came together, pooled ideas, and created a new product.

The success story of the local start-up behind the world's first translucent dental braces shows why it is important to have a good mix of local and foreign students in universities here, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday.

Singapore students gain from having foreign classmates because it prepares them for the global workplace, exposes them to competition and spurs them on to work harder, he said.

"And quite often, the local and foreign students will even partner and make new start-ups," he added.

He highlighted medical device firm BioMers, started by Singaporean Mervyn Fathianathan, 35, and Canadian-Greek George Aliphthiras, 37, in 2005. They met while pursuing a post-doctoral programme in technology commercialisation at the London Business School.

Two of Dr Fathianathan's friends from his undergraduate days at the National University of Singapore (NUS) were then roped in as co-founders. The idea for BioMers' signature product came from research that Dr Renuga Gopal, 32, and Ms Karen Teo, 34, were already working on.

The four hired their first employee after sending out a job offer via the NUS engineering faculty. He was Indian national Bindu Saran, 26, now a product development manager at BioMers.

Together, they created the world's

only completely clear orthodontic braces system, made of a polymer resin reinforced by glass fibre.

Launched last year, the translucent arch-wires, brackets and retainers are ideal for people who want to realign their teeth without wearing unsightly metal brackets and wires.

Dr Fathianathan told The Straits Times that it is essential for companies like BioMers, which deal with technology and mass-appeal products, to "think global".

"We need to get Singaporeans to think outside of Singapore, and the best way to do that is by interacting with people of other nationalities in university," he said.

While BioMers places a lot of importance on hiring Singaporeans, he said not all local students have the global perspective necessary for product development -

for example, when it comes to marketing products in Europe or the United States.

Over half of BioMers' 26 staff are Singaporean. The firm scored a coup in June when it landed Mr David Edwards, former president of eye-care giant Bausch and Lomb's Asia-Pacific division, as its chief executive.

Dr Fathianathan welcomed PM Lee's announcement that places for Singaporeans in local universities would increase. Universities here could then have more tie-ups with overseas institutions to allow students of all nationalities to work on projects together, he suggested.

BioMers has benefited from such interactions, he said. "Singaporeans can be less vocal in voicing their opinions. But when we have people from overseas who are more vocal, that tends to be passed on. That's the only way to get better."