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Education in management and the liberal arts: never the twain shall meet?

To prepare future leaders, the study of humanities should be an integral part of education now, not least in a management university, says new SMU Provost

JOINING a management university seems initially counter-intuitive for someone who professes a belief in liberal arts education. Not only have I professed a belief, I have spent several years of my life making a case for the liberal arts, defending and promulgating their value, and contributing to the establishment of the first such college in Singapore.

One might well accuse me of having turned tail. After all, the association of liberal arts with holistic, broad-based education, and the study of arts, humanities and social science disciplines like visual arts, literature, history, and classics leads many parents and prospective students to wonder if students graduate to unemployment.

A management university, on the other hand, is associated with the most pragmatic of missions – to prepare students professionally and specifically for management careers in their chosen fields, be they business, finance, law, or the public sector.

Yet, what the world needs today is not one or the other, but both. The notion of two-in-one made famous by instant coffee brands does not offer a particularly dignified precedent, but it is a faithful metaphor and a worthwhile endeavour. Singapore Management University (SMU), from inception, has demonstrated a commitment to broad-based and multi-disciplinary learning, critical thinking, and emphasis on communicative abilities (some might say these are characteristics of the liberal arts) whilst delivering in-depth education in a specialised (professional) field (distinctly not associated with the liberal arts).

The proof of the pudding is in the eating – the high demand in the marketplace as evidenced by high employment rates of SMU graduates year after year, and positive employer feedback.

Humanities and leadership

Ulrike Landfester, Vice-President of Universität St Gallen, wrote in 2013, "there are more and more universities who realise that there is something missing in business education. As the blame for the recent crisis continued to be laid at the door of business schools and business universities, these institutions try to find out whether they did wrong or not – and if they did wrong, why, and how can they remediate it. In this development, I think there are huge dynamics into the direction of integrating the humanities and social sciences into business education."

Integrating humanities (and social sciences) into business education is not a new endeavour at SMU. For example, all business students in their graduating year take a capstone course, with an option to take a 'great books course' where they study a selection of literary classics and works of philosophy. The course gives students a chance to examine how the great thinkers, writers and artists have tackled societal issues, and asks them to draw lessons for their own societal leadership to come. This is a recognition that the best literary and artistic works offer insights and opportunities for self-reflection.

Still, more can be done to integrate the humanities and social sciences into business education, which is on the cards at SMU.

The past as the way forward

In my recent conversations with a professor of corporate communications, Professor Mary Jo Hatch, she invoked cultural anthropology and history to explain corporate identity and how such identity may be strengthened. Cultural anthropologists study the collective sense that cultures or tribes have of themselves. Today, we call our tribes organisations. "Tribal members often explained their collective identity and who they were by telling their tribe's origin story. History allows us to start making a case for cultural-rooted collective identity."

Learning the ways of cultural anthropologists and historians is not a 'good to have'; a successful organisation needs to conscientiously and consciously draw on the depths of such historical and cultural knowledge. Managers who step back periodically from the daily focus on goals and growth to understand how a symbol and its historical roots or a historical moment can invoke a sense of belonging and commonality, stands a better chance of fostering the power to inspire and bond.

To prepare future leaders, such learning should be an integral part of education now, not least in a management university. The past can pay its own way with the right leaders, enriched by a historical sensitivity and cultural empathy.

Culture as the glue: coming unstuck

With increasing globalisation and widespread migration, the importance of effective cross-cultural communications in the workplace cannot be

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overstated. This, as we all know, is not only about language.

In international negotiations, for instance, contracts may be lost because one side believes the other to be pushing negotiations too quickly while the other believes there is feet dragging. For some, time is money. For others, time allows trust to build. Is the partnership to be a contract or a relationship to be built? Is the culture of communication one that values directness, or is the approach predominantly indirect and reliant on vague comments, metaphorical references, historical inferences and circumlocutions? What are the cross-cultural differences, and why?

To a certain extent, cultural awareness can be taught. At SMU, students may pick from a range of modules, such as 'Managing Diversity in Asia', 'Intercultural Communication', 'Cross-cultural Management & the Management of Diversity' and 'Cultural Psychology'. In an innovative move, for a course titled 'Global City-Stage – Singapore in the World, the World in Singapore', a class mix of half locals and half international students was intentionally stipulated so that there can be a real test of culture. Students discuss all sorts of issues, from the concept of free speech, national identity and language, to food and culture, and learn about cultural nuances and stereotypes through constructive and purposeful interaction and discussion.

Beyond formal platforms, SMU also provides opportunities for immersion and simply 'being there' – whether for a two-week overseas community service project, a 10-week internship abroad, or a full term of overseas exchange. Taking in all the 'culture shock' with support for reflection and learning is an impactful way to develop cultural sensitivity and empathy. With 86 per cent of students participating in one or more overseas programme, the opportunities for global and intercultural learning are tremendous. In the next phase, SMU aims to have 100 per cent of students participate in at least one overseas programme.

Morality magnified

Since the severe 2007-08 economic crisis, many more universities have joined SMU's ranks in emphasising an understanding of ethics and the practice of moral behaviour as fundamental to good leadership. I wish more would take ownership.

In an article on *Ethics and Leadership Effectiveness*, Dr Joanne Ciulla writes that "some of the central issues in ethics are also the central issues of leadership". She also reminds us that the most perceptive work on leadership and ethics comes from old texts, and that history and philosophy provide valuable perspective and lessons.

Indeed, while history provides opportunities to investigate the complexities of leaders, philosophy and religion prompt us to confront our moral dilemmas. It is at least for these reasons that beyond the existing compulsory 'Ethics and Responsibility' course and community service involvement, my wish is to add to the SMU curriculum more humanities modules in the years ahead.

What kind of graduates do we want and need?

Increasingly, those who graduate with a broad-based education display versatility, are articulate and knowledgeable in diverse subjects, and are sought after in the marketplace. Graduates who are more culturally aware are valued for their ability to manage conflicts, build trust and foster collaborative teams within their organisations. With a higher level of contextual and cultural intelligence, they are not only in a better position to motivate team-members and promote creativity, but also nurture an inclusive workplace that respects diversity. Over time, they tend to become 'global citizens' – talents that companies seek for their ability to think broadly and move in tandem with the speed of global change.

I would like to believe that a management university with a curriculum that combines specialisation with the holistic and broad-based approach of the liberal arts may well best-serve the future needs of Singapore. In this, SMU takes a lead.

This is a monthly series brought to you by the Singapore Management University. Next month's feature will examine the benefits and biases of using computerised decision aids in decision-making.

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