A Head For Business

A radical learning environment begets an open-mind. That’s the reason the Singapore Management University adopts an unconventional pedagogy that challenges and prepares its students to think on their feet in the real world.

“[We] immerse our students in an environment of disparaging views, clashing ideas, opinionated notions, no-hold-bars critiques. Then challenge them to mount a charm offensive to turn all these impinging forces on their head. Marshall these and you can line them up like ducks, directing furious energies to paddling underwater while gliding elegantly over the pond,” says Alan Goh, Director, Office of Undergraduate Admissions.

“Encouraging people skills, the application of knowledge in a convincing and creative way and a dynamic environment provide for what we call action learning - interactive peer-to-peer sparring sessions, quick witted thinking, cerebral thrusting and parrying. This is the unique SMU Experience where IQ (knowledge) meets EQ (life’s skills). Throw in CQ (charm quotient) and you’ll have a modern day, new economy leader and a professional in the making - bold, confident and articulate,” he continues.

If all this sounds exciting, you might like to know that other than the bachelor degrees in Accountancy, Business Management, Economic Science, Information Systems Management Science and Social Science, SMU also offers Masters of Science degrees in Applied Finance and Wealth Management for business professionals with a view to expand their knowledge or hone their skills.

DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY
Comprising four schools – the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, the School of Accountancy, the School of Economics & Social Sciences and the School of Information Systems (which has a partnership with the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, America, a school renowned for its strength in IT), the SMU’s principal drivers are Business Management, Accountancy, Economics and Social Sciences and Information Systems.

But how does SMU match up to the established institutions like NUS and NTU, whose business degrees are highly sought-after by local students, and world-renown universities like Harvard and the London School of Economics?
“In contrast to a hypermarket environment, ours is more like a boutique outlet where you can mix and match... and still come out tops. Because of our smallness, you get great personal attention and service!” explains Alan Goh.

At SMU, students don’t attend lectures or tutorials the way students do in most other tertiary institutions. Instead, their typical day consists of learning through smaller group seminars (of 40 students at the most) and active debates and discussions with both their peers and educators.

The aim is to create a whole lot more opportunities for interaction and critical thinking, so as to produce a new generation of individuals to whom lateral thinking comes as naturally as writing a routine report. It is hoped that this new breed of business minds will lead the new economy with their ability to think out of the box, and on their feet.

This effectiveness of the programme is evident. A group of pioneer Bachelor of Business Management students from SMU outclassed senior students from other local universities to win the NUS Business School Case Competition in 2001. Another team beat world-renowned universities to clinch an international championship at the Copenhagen Business School.

A TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY

“SMU’s programme is an honorary meritorious degree. Which means that unless motivation is not your friend, you should have no problem in qualifying. You can elect to do a second major. For instance, if your first degree is Business Management, your second major could be one of these disciplines: Accounting, Economics, Finance, Information Systems Management, Law, Marketing, Social Science,” Alan Goh explains.

“In effect, you chart your own ‘degree’ of destiny. If you’re really good, you could opt for a Double-Degree with two-degree scrolls to for the price of one. And because of the flexible curriculum and modular system, they do not have to take twice the number of subjects, only one-third more. The uniqueness of this programme is that you get two shots at the DD programme: sterling results at your “A” levels at the point of enrolment or through strong GPA grades after your first year of study,” says Goh.

“The crème de-la crème of students also get a shot at a glowing list of scholarships, thanks to a growing list of endorsers and believers in SMU. There are the prestigious Lee Kong Chian scholarships where candidates need to ‘walk on water or leap over tall buildings’ to qualify; the Li Ka-Shing scholarships that draw the best of China’s students like a magnet and a host of other noteworthy scholarships. One in ten of the brightest and most well-rounded students stand a chance of winning a scholarship,” he elucidates.

PARTNERING THE BEST

Having signed a collaborative agreement with the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania to develop SMU
into a specialised education centre for management, business and finance, means SMU gets the benefit of a tested model for curriculum design.

"When you are consistently with the best (we have just extended our collaboration from five to eight years) and Wharton is still the best business school in college ranking in 2004, you've got to measure up. Curriculum structuring (not just business, it now includes social science), research collaboration and student exchange programmes are some of value spin-offs of this enduring relationship," says Goh.

Yet another product of the collaboration is the Wharton-SMU Research Centre (WSRC). While it serves to reinforce the presence of the strong Wharton-SMU relationship, the centre keeps its focus on issues relevant to the Singapore and Asian market. While Wharton's tried-and-true educational model is relevant on a global scale, SMU adapts its curriculum for Asia. The approach is a flexible, multi-disciplinary one, equipped to deal with the complexities of the new economy.

And as part of Hewlett-Packard's philanthropy and education drive, SMU has received a cash and equipment grant worth almost $200,000 to develop a wireless learning and teaching environment. The Virtual Canvas programme has been a huge success, allowing professors to annotate presentations, while students can project their screen onto the LCD display to share their ideas with their teacher and peers. Technologically, SMU is poised to be the classroom of the future.

REAL LIFE VERSUS BOOK THEORY

A well-rounded education – the products of which are students with the strong ability to specialise in their field – is the objective of SMU's hands-on approach to business education.

Emphasis on computer literacy and technology aside, students are sent on company internships, business visits and student exchange programmes, both locally and internationally. Business Study Missions to California's Silicon Valley, Spain or India are not uncommon, as are extra-curriculum activities as far-fetched as expeditions to Sabah's Mount Kinabalu.

As part of the Singapore Universities Student Exchange Programme, students of SMU are given the opportunity to interact with students from other campuses and disciplines. Further a-field, international exchange programmes, study trips, study mission and overseas attachments are strongly encouraged by the school. The idea is to get as much exposure to different cultures, markets, education systems and work practices – knowledge invaluable to a good business mind, and which cannot be garnered just from books.

With this in mind, almost 100 per cent of applicants to the Student Exchange Programme are given the chance to go on exchange. "SMU has over 80 exchange agreements with universities all over the world. And no student who applied for exchange programme (local or overseas) has been denied: we have a 100 per cent fulfillment record! Real world exposure, living and studying in a different country (sometimes using a different language) for a semester, navigating the rich tapestry of cultures and diversity makes for an education beyond books and character building beyond compare," explains Goh. "Some students undertake to do trans-continental or tri-continental exchange programs to get a more global perspective."
Imagine how valuable and impressive this exposure will be when they present their resumes to their prospective employers – a multi-national pro in the making!

TEACHING OLD DOGS NEW TRICKS
The Executive Education Programme at SMU means that business executives can continually update their management and business skills to face the ever-changing landscape. Custom programmes have been tailored for large organisations like Apple Computer, Raffles Medical Group and KK Women’s & Children’s Hospital, but individuals are also able to benefit from SMU’s academic partners like Chicago Graduate School of Business (University of Chicago), Wharton and ESSEC Business School, Paris.

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Structured in an eclectic manner, the Executive Education programme, like the undergraduate courses, are a combination of theoretical study and hands-on interaction. Students are given ample opportunities to mingle with the course director, share experiences with peers from various industries or countries, and gain insightful perspectives that they otherwise wouldn’t get in the office.

In addition, SMU’s Distinguished Lecture Series creates opportunities for students and business folk to benefit from the experience and expertise of illustrious economists and academics such as Dr Tom Copeland who spoke about Matching Shareholder Value To Company Performance, and Nobel Laureate Lawrence Klein who gave insights into How Fast Is China Really Growing?

“...The intricacies of managing a business can be learnt through interactive classes, role plays, management simulation games and the sharing of industry veterans’ experiences. While no amount of mental knowledge can replace the lessons learnt through life’s trials and errors, a good executive programme can reduce much of the hard knocks that a business executive will receive in the real world,” says Goh.

THE NEW CITY CAMPUS
From 2005, SMU will operate from its spanking new city campus. A landmark project, the new SMU campus will inject vibrancy and life into the historic Bras Basah vicinity, which has been the seat of learning for many here. St Joseph’s Institution, Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus and Raffles Institution little further up have all been in the locale. Designed by Edward Cullinan Architects and KNTA Architects, the new campus promises to be the best Singapore has ever built, with the latest equipment and facilities.

A NEW AGE IN EDUCATION
In the new economy, a New Age type education.
Call it, if you may, a renaissance manager – someone who is not just capable in the work arena, but also socially and ethically responsible. The American-style pedagogy of SMU, adopted from the curriculum of Wharton Business School, is a balanced combination of science and liberal arts.

“...It provides] a broad-based and flexible education system – changing present day ‘rote-warriors’ to ‘road warriors’ of the future; nurturing leaders and entrepreneurs that do not think just in an analytical, rational and steely manner but in warm, inspiring and creative solution-seeking style,” says Alan Goh.

“...Put a group of 40-odd students in a class that encourages interactive learning, respecting diversity of views and experiences, exchanging and debating contrasting perspectives, framing solutions from all angles in a creative fashion. You get a bunch of pretty chaotic, exciting and edgy mavericks coming out with some neat ideas amid this seeming messiness. That’s the hallmark of SMU’s small-class size seminar style pedagogy that promotes unfettered and uninhibited thinking...”

Professors that stand on tables to drive a point through. Students that hyperventilate passionately over projects. Teachers that take the classroom to the outdoors (the Botanic Gardens is a regular haunt). Now, that’s holistic education for the new business mind!

For more information on SMU’s programmes, surf to www.smu.edu.sg

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