SMU – Going from being different to making a difference

Varnish is perceived to be a rising star that is young, vibrant and entrepreneurial

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FIVE years since it burst upon Singapore’s avid education scene, the Singapore Management University (SMU) has gone beyond making American-style teaching in higher education a hot new trend.

It is now a brand leader, to quote Mr Alan Goh, the university’s sharply dressed director of undergraduate admissions and a respected marketing maven himself.

But he is not the only torchbearer for SMU. Interviews with its current batch of students reveal an enthusiasm for the university that evangelists would weep.

“IT’s not just the education system which is so terrific – it’s the people too. No other school invites you to lunch and the networking is so great,” said student Jade Seah, 21.

The niche marketing and corporate communications major is funding part of her study expenses by working as a part-time model and has appeared on the covers of some of Singapore’s top-end glossy magazines. This combination of brains and beauty may not be typical of the average SMU student but it serves to highlight the importance the university places on diversity in its student population, its faculty and its programmes.

Its liberal but rigorous pedagogy – on the lines of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School on which it models itself – and institutional autonomy have gained the school almost a cult status among Singapore’s students.

More importantly, it has established itself as such a reliable source of graduates among the nation’s top corporations, that for two years running, the heads of several blue-chip companies have vouched for them in eye-catching university recruitment advertisements.

“We’ve gone from being different, to making a difference,” said Mr Goh.

SMU has evolved. It is widely perceived by parents, junior college and university students, including foreign students, as a creative rising star.

There are statistics to back this up.

According to a study by market research company Taylor Nelson Sofres last November, SMU has the makings of a vibrant and entrepreneurial campus, said Mr Goh.

A 2004 graduate employment survey by SMU showed that 100 per cent of its graduates found jobs within six months of graduating.

Of these, 60 per cent were offered jobs “way before” graduating and 75 per cent had more than two job offers.

That it achieved this at a time when Singapore’s jobless numbers were hitting an all-time high of 5 per cent speaks for the efficacy of its admission system, which includes invitations to lectures and one-to-one interviews besides the rigorous SATs tests – similar to the Ivy-League business schools in the United States.

“That is a validation of the kind of people we produce,” said Mr Goh.

Above all, it speaks of the commitment of the faculty.

How many universities are there in the world, let alone in Singapore, where a donor kicks-starts a scholarship fund by paying a whopping $80,000 out of his own savings to fund two needy but bright young men’s studies?

One of them, 22-year-old Shashank Nigam who is doing a double degree in information systems management and business management, has been working pro bono since his first year at the university, building websites for five corporations for the experience.

The Indian national was also the only first-year student to be interned at global consultancy firm Accenture.

The ball that Dr Steven Miller, dean of SMU’s school of information systems, set rolling is being taken up by its school of accounting where all the faculty members have chipped in generously to start a scholarship fund for a couple of students a year.

The students recognise the commitment and return it in good measure.

For 22-year-old Rebecca Wong, who is doing a double degree in marketing and corporate communications, volunteering to give a power talk to a group of discerning parents of potential students on the merits of studying at her university is all in a day’s work.

“We wear our hearts on our sleeve when we speak about SMU,” is the way Dr Goh described a recent presentation by Ms Wong.

Not surprising for a school where faculty members tend to stress the importance of using industry terms like “literate,” “daring” and “wonderful people” to evaluate their students.