Break from rigidity pays off

Being different has helped SMU attract the country’s top students, says university’s provost

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FIVE years ago, as the new kid on the block, the Singapore Management University (SMU) had a hard time convincing the country’s top students to come on board.

"We were an unknown entity and had nothing to sell at that time. Why should a kid sign up with us when they didn’t know who we were?” said its provost, Professor Tan Chin Tiong.

But its wry newness gave SMU good grounds for what was to become an enormously successful marketing strategy, which was to position itself as a university with a difference.

SMU said it would break away from the “rigid British style of education” provided by its two competitors, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), explained Prof Tan.

"There were many students then who were not pleased with the focused and narrow type of curricula. There was a latent demand in the market for the US-style of education. So we went out and provided an American pedagogy and curriculum, and people responded,” he said.

"It’s almost like selling castles in the air, but the important thing was, people believed in those castles.”

Moving forward, Prof Tan intends to further develop SMU’s graduate programme offerings in the coming years. But he says any new courses introduced would have to be related to its core of business education.

SMU currently offers three Masters of Science courses in areas like Applied Finance and Wealth Management. Said Prof Tan: "We have established a strong undergraduate programme already, so the graduate market is our next phase of development.”

SMU’s relentless efforts to build its brand have paid off handsomely. For its inaugural intake, 2,000 students vied for just 300 openings. Earlier this month when the university admission deadline closed, SMU was nearly nine times oversubscribed, having received a record 9,400 applications for its 1,100 places for the next academic year.

NUS and NTU received about 45,500 applicants for its 11,500 places.

"NUS had always been the benchmark in the past. At NTU, apart from a few disciplines, the quality of students is still a notch lower than NUS. Even after being around for 25 years, NTU was not able to get the quality of students to compete with NUS.”

"SMU did that in just four years,” said Prof Tan.

One trump card for SMU is its new 4.5 ha, $426 million city campus at Bras Basah.

"It’s going to be hard for the other two universities to replicate what we’ve done here. We are way ahead of them, infrastructure-wise. They will have to catch up on other fronts. But this is what competition is all about.”

And to set the record straight: Is SMU really that “different”, as the university’s aggressive advertising drives have claimed?