Bosses of local SMEs go back to school with SMU

WHEN the Singapore Management University (SMU) launched its first CEO programme tailored for small and medium enterprises (SME) about a fortnight ago, it did not expect that to find its first student from among the audience at its launch presentation.

Mr Charles Wong, director of shoe company Charles & Keith, signed up on learning about the 18-week programme, which touches on the three areas of strategy, finance and marketing.

“He told me it was exactly what he was looking for,” recounted a delighted Ms Annie Koh, associate dean of SMU’s Lee Kong Chian School of Business, about Mr Wong, who has an O level.

The university’s new Executive Management Programme — believed to be the first of its kind to cater specifically to SME bosses — could not have found a better poster boy.

The 31-year-old Mr Wong founded Charles & Keith with his brother, Keith — the company’s chief designer — in 1996.

The duo grew their mother’s small Ang Mo Kio shoe shop into a $28-million-a-year business with 11 stores in Singapore and 20 overseas.

The soft-spoken Mr Wong, who was among four entrepreneurs in an SMU-organised panel discussion that attracted 70 participants, recounted how he had to learn everything from scratch.

On roping in overseas partners, he said that he learnt about ISO manufacturing standards from the Philippines — a crucial step towards the factories that Charles & Keith now operate in Malaysia and China.

The firm’s Japanese customers, on the other hand, imparted very strict quality-control standards, which he would then demand from his suppliers.

Of the inevitable knocks along the way, such as facing “sarcastic remarks” from cynics or not getting support from shoe suppliers in the beginning, Mr Wong said: “It’s not hard if you fall. It’s how hard you learn from the fall.”

His pragmatic “meet the problem, solve it and move on” approach has resulted in franchises in Indonesia, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Mauritius and the Middle East.

There are plans to gain a footing too in Europe and the United States, Mr Wong told TODAY at the sidelines of the session.

Other members of the SMU discussion panel included Ms Dawn Wee, executive vice-president of Stamford Tyres, NextView CEO Stephen Lai, and Apex-Pal International CEO Douglas Foo.

On the university’s latest SME programme, which commences on Sept 16, Ms Koh said: “The learning is not just from the faculty. Having the right mix of local CEOs gathered together once a week to discuss key issues pertaining to SMEs is a great way for them to network and learn together.”

“What’s even more important is they can help each other grow as a cluster and move forward and grow regional,” she stressed.

— VAL CHUA