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MANAGING EDUCATION
Professor Howard Hunter on leading the Singapore Management University and staying one step ahead of the competition
The Singapore Management University is going through an exciting phase: It will be moving to a new campus and plans to raise the number of students. Felix Cheong learns more from newly appointed president Professor Howard Hunter.

officially incorporated in 2000, SMU is Singapore's first private university. Currently calling the sprawling Bukit Timah campus home, it'll be shifting to its new premises at Bras Basah by the middle of this year.

All these changes, both on the domestic and international fronts, certainly spell an exciting time for SMU's third president, Professor Howard Hunter, who was appointed for a five-year term last September.

Self-spoken, gentle and polite almost to a fault, as befitting a Southern gentleman from Georgia, Hunter is a renowned authority on law and has previously held the positions of provost and dean of the law school at Emory University in Atlanta.

The Edge Singapore caught up with the good professor for his take on steering the 3,000-student-strong SMU.

In a poll of 835 junior college students conducted by The Straits Times last year, it was found that almost two-thirds prefer to study in NUS, while only 10% would opt for SMU. What's your response to these figures?

First of all, they polled junior college students in all disciplines. We have only four schools at SMU [School of Business, School of Accountancy, School of Economics and Social Sciences and School of Information Systems] and we have a business-management focus. We're not going to get the ones who want to do physics or engineering. So, that poll was skewed.

If you look at those who want to study the areas that we offer, our percentage is actually much higher:

So, how would you continue to use your differentiation from NUS and NTU as a selling point?

One of the key factors of our pedagogy... and this is very different from the British model — is the requirement that our students have a core curriculum, which is broad-based and something that is not exactly like but akin to the liberal-arts curriculum in US universities.

Students can't just skip over it; they must have that base level. This creates a common experience among students and also exposes them to different ways of approaching problems. And it helps them in the long run.

The other is our small-class, personalised pedagogy. In this new campus, all classrooms, except for one or two that will be [used] for the occasional large lecture, are small so that we're physically restrained. And that's designed on purpose. That was a clear message we wanted to send out about the importance of small classes.

But it's not enough to just have small classes, because you can have terrible professors in small classes just as you can have very good professors in big lectures. So, it's also about training the faculty to work in an interactive way and getting students actively engaged in their own learning experience.

Wouldn't these physical restraints, as you mentioned, limit SMU's growth?

In the long-term growth plan, we'd have 6,000 undergraduates and no more. And up to 2,000 postgraduate students, some of whom will be part-time. The campus will only accommodate that many students. If the decision were ever taken to grow larger than that, there'd have to be some kind of expansion. There's a little bit of room for growth in this campus — a little bit, but not much.

Do you foresee logistical problems managing a university spread over several plots, separated by major crossroads?

A lot of campuses in major cities are in fact like that, located in the central city, like Columbia University and New York University. There are always going to be dislocation problems from having to deal with the traffic. But the campus will all be connected underground by a concourse, which will also be connected to the MRT. Eventually, the government's plan is to have an underground passageway that goes all the way from Dhoby Ghaut to City Hall [stations].

Would there come a day when SMU is tempted to join the big boys and become a full-fledged university?

Well, our charter, at the moment, is limited to that of a management university. As one of

One of the key factors of our pedagogy... is the requirement that our students have a core curriculum, which is broad-based and something that is not exactly like but akin to the liberal-arts curriculum in US universities. Students can't just skip over it; they must have that base level.
our trustees said: Management really means leadership and we’re trying to train another
generation of leaders in business, economics, information systems and social scienc-
es. Whether we go into other schools will de-
pend on whether we can coalesce and define
exactly what we do and how and whether
we want to. There are areas we can expand
into but I doubt we’re going into the lab sci-
cences or engineering. Certainly not any time
in the future.

But with NUS and NTU recently given the
green light to go autonomous, the pressure
is certainly on SMU to keep one step ahead
of your competitors.

Competition is great because without it, there’s
no spur to keep moving ahead. It’s good but
the three local universities are, in some way,
complementary rather than competitive. Each
serves a different market. And there are plen-
ty of good students in Singapore for all three.
Now, two or three things are going to happen
over the next few years.

Number one, the government has adopted
the policy of increasing the size of each cohort
who will go on to university, roughly from 20%
to about 25%. That’s fairly substantial...

Does this necessarily mean a lowering of
standards, a dropping of the bar?
It shouldn’t. At present, we have eight appli-
cants for every place. So, we’ve got far more
applications than we can handle. We’ve got
a lot of [potential for] growth, even under
current circumstances. I don’t think stand-
ards will drop too much because the kids
here are really bright. That will also mean a
few more polytechnic students going on to
the university.

The second major policy is to increase the
number of foreign students coming to Singa-
pore. We get about 15% foreign students now.
This will increase over time.

There are huge markets out there. India is
currently our biggest supplier at SMU. China
is growing rapidly. And Singapore has barely
tapped into Indonesia.

This 20% to 25% growth is slightly mis-
leading actually. If you take all students who
go on to some kind of post-secondary edu-
cation, including polytechnics or those who
study overseas, you get pretty close to 50%.

That’s about the same percentage as in the
US. It places Singapore right up there at the
highest level internationally, of the number
of students in an age group with post-second-
ary education.

With this growth, funding will become a
major issue, as it has in institutions in the
US, UK and Australia. How do you balance
the need to pull in funding and yet not com-
promise on standards?

Well, you can’t compromise standards and
attract funds. That’s something people learn
very soon. If you compromise on standards,
donors don’t earn interest. So, you have to
have the two of them go together.

Another thing I’ve found quite remark-
able at SMU is how some donors have put a
lot of faith in this university. There’ve been
a number of donors, [contributing] a million
dollars here, a million there. And then, some-
one like Li Ka-shing puts in something like $20
million. And the Lee Family Foundation puts
in $50 million. And the government matches
this dollar-for-dollar.

The Lee Foundation donation, plus the gov-
ernment’s match, would amount to US$120
million. That puts it in the top eight or nine
gifts to any university in the world, at any time.
To put this much faith in a new, fledgling
university in Singapore — I thought that says a lot
about what people want to accomplish here.

We’ve been fortunate in being able to raise
a good deal of money for an endowment. The
long-term goal is to create an endowment that
would generate 20% to 25% of the operat-
ing budget.

At the end of your five-year term, how
would you like your administration to be
remembered?
Both challenging and humane. Humane, in
the sense of helping people fulfil their own
desires and interests and abilities to do what
they had set out to do. And challenging, in
the sense of getting people to live up to their
best, whether they’re students or faculty staff,
to create an institution of distinction for Sin-
gapore and the world.

Felix Cheong is a published poet whose third
book was shortlisted for the Singapore Lit-
ture Prize.