SMU forces degree of change on rivals

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EDUCATION Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who was recently interviewed about Singapore Management University (SMU) and the young institution’s greatest contribution to higher education here has been to be the “change agent of the university space”.

He said: “SMU has competed as an upstart with established players. It got them to rethink what they themselves were doing.”

With SMU commemorating its city campus and its five-year milestone today, it is useful to look at what lies behind the high accolade the Education Minister paid the university.

Last year, SMU received 9,400 applications for the 1,100 places it offered. As much as 80 per cent of those who enrolled in its business school last year, had been offered places by both the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). They preferred SMU over NUS and NTU, even though SMU charges $570 a year more than the other two.

SMU is known to be different and for spurring the Government to rethink how universities here should be governed and funded. Surprisingly, when SMU was first conceived, it was modelled on the established NUS and NTU.

The Government’s initial plan was for NTU’s business students to go to SMU, while SMU’s business students to go to SMU, while NUS’s students to go to NUS. The Government’s initial plan was for NTU’s business students to go to SMU, while SMU’s business students to go to NUS, and announced that SMU, which had tied for the top, was to be different from NUS and NTU, even though SMU charges $570 a year more than the other two.

SMU provost Tan Chin Tong was confident it would work. “If they want to pass, they have to be confident and speak up. If you have to keep doing this over and over again, it becomes second nature.”

Five years on, all this seems to have made a difference. Two thirds of SMU’s pioneer class of 369 students were picked in its first employment survey last year. All landed jobs within six months of graduation, with more than half reporting that they had found jobs even before. Threequarters received two or more job offers. Their average annual starting salary was $32,500.

Employers noted that SMU students are a distinct breed — articulate, confident and mature. The employment figures highlighted the fact that SMU has become a credible challenge. NUS and NTU felt the need to change.

For one, the two universities moved towards a qualitative rather than quantitative approach in selecting students. NUS and NTU donors were also forced to think how they can differentiate themselves and keep their best students.

NUS used its high worldwide ranking and illustrious university partners to offer its students exposure overseas. It also started building a university town at the former Warren Golf Club site in Clementi to give its students a residential college experience.

NTU’s direction has been less clear, partly because it has moved beyond its technological focus to offer programmes in social sciences, digital media and even fine arts.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged the university recently to develop a distinctive and sustainable edge. “You can aspire to be either like Harvard or Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but you cannot aspire to be both,” he told NTU when it celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Just three months after PM Lee’s speech, the Government paved the way for NUS and NTU to be reformed into privately run universities, like SMU. The Government hopes their new-found freedom education will continue. They intend to keep their best students.

But what about SMU? How should SMU continue to differentiate itself and make a difference? SMU dons have said their innovation in business education will continue. They intend to keep enrolment small, up to 6,000.

Its location in the heart of the city district will continue to draw students but it must use its strategic location to expose them to real life learning.

Looking further into the future, say 20 years from now, how will the SMU difference be measured?

The globalised world calls for a new kind of business leadership. SMU should strive to produce leaders who will ensure Singapore’s survivability.

NUS and NTU have produced hundreds of graduates who have gone on to hold important jobs in government, business and industry. Their business graduates figure among the movers and shakers in Singapore’s largest companies.

SMU chairman Ho Kwon Ping has said the university’s mission is to produce “visionary leaders with a fine sense of ethics and social responsibility”. It will have made a real difference when that vision is realised.