Does SMU really live up to all the hype?

QUALITY, a different education plus the guarantee of "100 per cent job employment!"

So promised the posters placed around town just outside Singapore Management University's city campus.

But is SMU really that different from the other local universities?

The disappointing turn-out at the NUS open house, in contrast to the crowds at SMU, seems to indicate that SMU is stealing potential freshmen away from the more conventional choices of NUS and NTU.

My question is: Can SMU, a new university with limited courses, provide quality education with a difference?

After all, there are claims that the NUS factory-like education system produces virtually identical degree-holders while SMU moulds personable, vocal and able graduates who learn beyond the academic realm.

Out of curiosity and unable to afford an overseas student exchange programme, I decided to check out SMU through its local student exchange programme (SEP).

I figured it was a good time to get a breather from my home university to experience the supposedly different learning environment at SMU.

I remember being pleased initially as my travelling time was reduced by half. Though I felt a little out of place in my T-shirt and slacks next to my SMU peers in makeup and short skirts, I learnt to ignore these superficial differences.

I was also pleased with the escalators in SMU as climbing countless flights of stairs was almost routine in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in NUS.

The classroom ergonomics seemed to contribute to a more conducive learning environment.

Material comforts, however, soon gave way to emotional distress. Fatigue gradually took a toll on me as the three-hour seminar-style lectures dragged on forever.

The emphasis on class participation saw many students fighting to speak up just for the marks. Needless to say, this seldom contributed to the discussions.

These unfocused discussions were exacerbated by the inter-disciplinary nature of the modules — a supposed selling point of SMU.

It was therefore almost inevitable that students borrowed their arguments heavily from their disciplines, confusing students of other disciplines.

By the end of the day, I usually had a headache from trying to filter out the "noise" of heated discussions.

So much for quality education.

Of course, there were some nice, enthusiastic and hardworking lecturers who tried to make a difference, but one got the impression they sometimes worked with their hands tied.

The trade-off of inter-disciplinary courses and emphasis on cultivating outspoken and confident individuals seems to have reduced the educators' ability to effectively convey important theoretical knowledge to the students.

In this respect, I felt shortchanged by the SMU system and cannot help but think of its excellent marketing strategy as promising too much. I was disappointed with its inability to deliver on my expectations.

My stint at SMU did allow me to experience the best of both worlds. But if I were to choose only one, it would still be the conventional education hub which supposedly mass-produces generic graduates from the NUS oven.

The writer, 22, is a third-year political science undergraduate at NUS.