Spunky university that has a passion for its students

The proof? SMU dared to take in a convicted drug peddler who made it to the Dean's List

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ARGUABLY, few educational institutions can match the Singapore Management University's (SMU) "X" factor conveyed in its sassy branding campaigns and few have been as successful as the university in getting students to buy into its dream.

Just ask Ms Lim Kexin, a corporate tax consultant at Pricewaterhouse-Coopers who gave up an offer at a more established university here to be in the infant SMU's first accountancy class.

The articulate 24-year old whose "wannabe" list includes Prime Minister of Singapore said it was SMU's admission interview that was the deciding factor.

"It was so obvious that the professor who interviewed me at the other university was just going through the motions. But the SMU professor really showed he was interested in me as a student and in my views."

Such inclusiveness and passion for its students is part of SMU's DNA, says Mr Alan Goh SMU's insightful director of undergraduate admissions.

It's also an understatement.

SMU's "brave new world" approach to pedagogy is probably unmatched by any other university here.

"Only a singularly focused, democratic and spunky institution as the SMU would admit a convicted drug peddler and then put him on the prestigious Dean's List.

Which is what happened last year when business management and accountancy student Jimmy Bob, 30, who had spent five years in jail for drug peddling made it to SMU's Dean's List.

At that time, Mr Goh had said that when admitting Mr Bob, the school never grilled him about his past.

We "sussed out Jimmy's character and aspirations in a holistic manner," Mr Goh had said.

This holistic approach is not merely good copy in SMU's eye-catching advertisements, which draw on real SMU students and real bosses. It is the refrain that hums through the school's business-based curricula imbuing its graduates with a sense of purpose that goes beyond competency.

"SMU has given me a very good grounding in allowing me to explore and pick up skills as well as be socially conscious," vouches Mr Teo Yee Hean a risk analyst at Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) who graduated with a double degree in business management and economics.

"We were trained to face challenges and not run away from them," said the 27-year old honours graduate who was hired on campus several months before graduating and has a yen for community work bred in him at SMU.

But the key achievement of the six-year old university must undoubtedly be its highly-employable graduates. SMU graduates' 100 per cent employment rate makes the university stand out from its older and bigger counterparts who score slightly lower.

For the second year since it produced graduates, 100 per cent of SMU graduates have found jobs within six months of graduation. Sixty-five per cent of them get jobs before graduation and 76 per cent have between two and 10 job offers.

While SMU's business students' average starting pay of $2,600 per month compares favourably with NUS' business graduates' (without honours) pay of $2,550, many of SMU's business and accountancy graduates earn between $5,000 and $10,000 a month.

Even SMU's admission criteria — based on a broader range than other universities — signals its distinctive-ness. Admission is based on A-Level scores, SATs scores, a reflective essay, a panel interview and applicants' scores outside class.

It has another equally motivating differentiator. Every student who applies for an overseas exchange programme is given approval. The university hopes to see all its students go abroad in five years.

"All this traces back to our very innovative curriculum," said Mr Alan Goh.

"Our own minister of education has called us a catalyst in the education system. Knowledgeable and flexible students like Yee Hean and Kexin are manifestations of our curriculum. In them you can see we're producing not just business leaders but socially-conscious leaders."