AS THE best universities of the world will vouch, students benefit significantly from education that takes place within a diverse setting.

After all, said experts, a substantial portion of a good university's curriculum is enhanced by the discourse made possible by the heterogeneous backgrounds of its students.

In an April 1996 resolution expressing strong support for continued attention to diversity in university admissions, the Association of American Universities said that "students encounter and learn from others who have backgrounds and characteristics very different from their own".

"As we seek to prepare students for life in the 21st century, the educational value of such encounters will become more important, not less, than in the past."

On that score, the Singapore Management University (SMU) is as good as the best American universities. Arguably the first university here to make diversity a key pillar of its student enrolment programme, it is known for attracting a highly eclectic, but talented student body.

This year, among its new batch of undergraduates, it has a successful teenage entrepreneur, a national high jumper, a 34-year-old building project manager, a gold medallist in music and a reformed "drug lord".

"That's what SMU is about — varied and all. Such open admissions are what helps us resonate and bond with thousands of students who apply to SMU each year," said Mr Alan Goh, director of undergraduate admissions.

"They make us humbler and more determined to serve as many of them as possible," said Mr Goh, whose "street cred" with the youngsters is educative.

SMU, however, does not admit unusual students merely for their "stun" factor.

"It's a myth to say that when we admit students of diverse talents that they are necessarily students of average grades or that grades do not count," said Mr Goh.

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A member of the Singapore Youth Orchestra and winner of the Singapore Youth Foundation Gold 2005 award, Ms Xu — who will study business administration — breezed through her A Levels from Anglo-Chinese Junior College where she snagged a music scholarship.

SMU demonstrably subscribes to the notion of the "human element" in admission processes. In this, too, it has great company.

In 1996, Neil L. Rudenstine — the then-president of Harvard College — wrote in the Harvard Gazette that grades and test scores, in themselves, do not tell the whole story about candidates for admission.

"In selecting those students who will be offered places, the whole must be seen to be genuinely greater than the sum of the parts."

In SMU, one need look no further than 23-year-old Henry Lin for proof of this. SMU's officials had no hesitation in admitting to their school this former drug addict and traffic fresh out of prison.

The young man, who completed his A Levels as a private candidate while in prison, heard about SMU from his counsellor and the rest is history — an increasingly familiar one for SMU, which has, at least, another former convict among its undergraduates.

"His grades aren't something we're going to go lenient on and it's not only because of his past that we're taking him in. So, he needs to work hard and stay clean to stay on," said Mr Goh.

"If we looked only at the grades, he wouldn't have made it. We look beyond grades. We look for the little leading light in every individual. And, in him, we saw a special leading light."

That same insight led the university to admit 21-year-old entrepreneurial prodigy Aaron Tan, who started an IT business at age 13 and now makes in annual revenues of well over $100,000.

Confidence spilling out of every pore, the tall, sporty graduate of Ngee Ann Polytechnic, who will be studying business, said he chose SMU for the same reason he chose a poly over a junior college. "I wanted to do something related to business and real life situations and also be able to make money."

He could not be more different than the self-effacing Goh Wee Meng, 34, who slugged for several years as a project manager after graduating from Ngee Ann Polytechnic and now plans to do a double degree in IT and business management.

The bachelor — who is a Lee Kong Chian scholar at SMU — lives with his parents "because they are old and need looking after". He spends his spare time giving free tuition to needy children.