The dean, formerly His Excellency

Prof Pang of SMU’s school of business says diplomatic stint enhanced cultural sensitivity

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HE MAY no longer be negotiating deals with politicians or hobnobbing with royalty, but Professor Pang Eng Fong is putting his years of diplomatic experience to work as the new dean of the Singapore Management University’s (SMU) Lee Kong Chian School of Business.

There are similarities between his previous overseas postings – which had taken him to places like South Korea and Europe – and his new appointment, which took effect on June 1, the 62-year-old told TODAY.

“As an ambassador, you represent Singapore and meet people, persuade and convince them about the country. Similarly, as a dean now, much of what I have to do is to persuade people to do things,” the affable man said.

“Academics are like cats. They are independent operators and cannot be called to heel, unlike dogs which obey and stick to you all the time,” he added with a laugh, saying that he has one pet cat.

But on a more serious note, Prof Pang pointed out that diplomacy has enhanced his sensitivity towards cultural diversity, while holding his ground on tough issues at the international level – traits which he hopes to pass on to undergraduates in the business school.

“Being in diplomacy gives you a trained capacity to find a solution which is appropriate to the environment, just like in business. While there are some things you cannot compromise, such as ethics and integrity, your aim is to ensure that both parties feel that they are better off when they come to an agreement. It may not be perfect, but it is a workable solution.”

Diplomacy too, has helped him accumulate an arsenal of contacts in the public and private sectors, both locally and internationally, which would be “useful in getting the support and the involvement of interesting people for our activities on campus”, he said.

Another item on his to-do list is to increase the number of quality senior-level faculty at the school, which he said has done well but “has been expanding fairly fast”.

Senior faculty members, such as associate and full professors, can mentor the junior-level faculty members and have a “stabilising effect” on the school.

“We are working hard to recruit them, but it’s hard because they are already well-established overseas.”

Besides his portfolio of ambassadorial postings, Prof Pang is also director at the SMU’s Wee Kim Wee Centre, which was set up to promote understanding on how cultural diversity can affect economic development.

An economist by training, he has also served on the boards of several government agencies, such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

But he considers himself first and foremost an academic. After all, he started his career teaching at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where he rose to head the university’s Economic Research Centre, and taught at its business school for 10 years before his diplomatic career took him overseas.

He joined the SMU in 2002 and has taught courses on macroeconomics, as well as the dynamics between government, business and society. And even though deans seldom teach, Prof Pang – who has taught seven out of eight semesters – will not be handing over the classroom.

“It’s fun. I teach because I want to keep in touch with the students,” he said, adding that the learning environment in Singapore has gotten livelier and more diverse, but also more competitive since he took time out from academia in 1994.

Believing strongly that there must be more to education than just grades, Prof Pang recalled how a student remarked that he regretted going to SMU because he could no longer score As.

“I told him that he was in a very competitive environment and that there are many smart kids around,” he said.

“We have to educate him that life is not just a series of As. While we want students who do well, we also want them to be right-minded and do good.”