$20m to entice SME chiefs back to school

Spring S'pore and local universities to offer executive MBA courses for bosses of smaller firms

BY ARTHUR POON

THE Government is spending $20 million to entice 1,000 bosses of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) back to school over the next five years.

Spring Singapore has partnered the three domestic universities – Nanyang Technological University (NTU), National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore Management University – to roll out executive MBA and management executive programmes tailored for SME chiefs.

Minister of State for Trade and Industry Lee Yi Shyan, who launched the programme yesterday, said: “Continual learning, acquiring new skills, benchmarking against industry and learning from the competition, are all critical in helping SMEs grow, adapt and stay competitive.

“A learning CEO is one that builds capacity for his SME.”

The idea of training a new breed of SME managers, as well as encouraging the current batch to go back to business school, was mooted last year by Mr Philip Yeo, who now chairs Spring Singapore.

Mr Yeo had singled out management training as a key strategy to revive the SME scene.

This includes developing specific modules such as management and growth dynamics of family businesses and managing an SME’s initial public offering.

The $20 million will go to the universities to help fund the customisation of their existing postgraduate and executive development courses to focus on the needs of SMEs.

Fees for the executive development courses will range from $8,000 to $15,000, while postgraduate courses will cost around $35,000.

Dr Hon Hai, the dean of NTU’s business school, said: “The programmes aim to impart knowledge and skills and provide networking opportunities to SME executives to help them grow their businesses successfully in and beyond Singapore.”

The executive MBA programmes at NTU and NUS will be offered in July while the executive development programmes will be launched in the second half of the year.

One SME boss, Mr Low Cheong Kee, is already looking forward to going back to school.

The managing director of Home-Fix The D.I.Y Store said: “We have been aggressively upgrading our staff by encouraging them to sign up for diploma courses.

“It’s time to do my part, and I look forward to upgrading myself with the executive development programme.”

At a panel discussion that followed yesterday’s launch, SME leaders shared their experiences of the challenges involved in managing small businesses in Singapore.

Among the top concerns are the difficulty in getting financing, expanding overseas as well as attracting and retaining talent.

The CEO of DNR Process Solutions, Mr Dinesh Sharma, said: “Banks are usually hesitant to lend to SMEs when they need money most and want to lend when you are successful and don’t need it.”

On the issue of expanding overseas, Mr Daniel Tay, the founder of cafe-bakery chain Bakerzin, said: “Overseas competition in places like New York is always intense, and unless you understand the market well it can be quite risky.”

Mr Tay opened Bakerzin’s first American outlet in January in the south-western state of Arizona, which seems more backwater than the glamour cities of New York and Los Angeles.