Students? But they can teach you a thing or two

By Shashank Nigam

When I went on an exchange programme last year to Carnegie Mellon University, one of the courses I took was personal wealth management.

The course basically involved learning about how to invest in stocks and funds.

On the day of the first class, two professors walked in. Both were casually dressed.

In fact, one was sporting a crumpled T-shirt and bermuda shorts.

But the greatest surprise was yet to come.

They introduced themselves cheerily as graduate students.

They had both been investing for more than 10 years and had personally managed millions of dollars worth of portfolios.

One wants to graduate to be a trader on Wall Street, and the other wants to be a finance professor.

However, this was not a course about how to become a millionaire overnight or how to be a big player in the share market.

The course was helpful precisely because it offered a student's perspective — to start small and manage risks.

In Singapore, I cannot imagine my classmates teaching me such a course.

But a senior student teaching such a course is common in many top American universities.

At Carnegie Mellon, I found a huge number of eclectic courses being offered.

They ranged from the basics of ice skating, taught by a former college team captain, to weaving for men.

No kidding.

The American universities have a very practical system in place for such courses.

Any student can propose a course to the administration in an area that he has an expertise in and something that is not addressed by the courses currently being offered.

Once the proposal is approved by the committee, the student designs the course content under the mentorship of a professor.

Other than gaining useful teaching experience, the student earns more than what a teaching assistant or a research assistant would, but substantially less than a full-time professor.

As for the students taking the course, it counts towards one of their electives, where only half or less credit is awarded.

I found this to be a brilliant concept. If a person feels he is good in a particular area, why not share the knowledge?

At the Singapore Management University, it's common to see investment workshops, business-plan writing classes or even rock-climbing lessons being held regularly by students.

All that needs to be done is to formalise these efforts.

This would encourage increased student participation and involvement, and will add a new dimension to their education.

I feel it is in Singapore's interest to be a front-runner in applying this, in our quest to become a global education hub.

But for some real impact, the initiative needs to come from the top.

I would love to have the Education Minister and his team think about the feasibility of implementing student-taught courses in not only the universities, but even polytechnics and junior colleges.

Such a programme has the potential to change the face of education.

And I can't wait for the day when it happens.

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