System that makes a difference

SMU's top grads give credit to the varsity's education methods

IT SHOULD come as no surprise that the top graduates or valedictorians of the Singapore Management University (SMU) all come from the university's School of Accountancy (SOA).

After all, this is the school whose students are among the highest earners of all SMU graduates. The university was in the news recently when its latest graduate employment survey revealed that all graduates of 2006 landed jobs within six months of graduation at starting salaries that were 13 per cent higher than the national average.

Of the 353 graduates who responded to the survey, the top earners were employed in investment banking. Eight found jobs that paid between $8,000 and $12,000 a month. Many are believed to be SOA graduates.

Also, all three valedictorians of the last three years are SOA graduates. Two of them — Mr Lim Kong Wee and Mr Darren Lim — work in investment banking at HSBC. The third — Ms Kexin Lim — is a corporate tax associate at PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Ms Lim, a valedictorian in 2005, took up a PricewaterhouseCoopers tax scholarship after her first year of studies.

Said Ms Lim: SMU's "dynamic seminars and project work honed my technical, project and people management skills. SMU's practical education has found many applications in my daily work and provides a solid foundation for my on-the-job and in-house classroom training."

Mr Lim Kong Wee joined the Global Banking department of HSBC as an analyst after he graduated in 2004, amid stiff competition in a slowly recovering economy. He was promoted to associate last year.

"Obtaining a position in investment banking was "very difficult," he said, due to a tight job market then. He credits his time at SMU as instrumental in helping him land his current job.

"SMU's education system made all the difference and made me stand out from the other candidates," said Mr Lim. "It provided me an all-round education with unrivalled breadth of unique experiences." These include an exchange programme at Wharton Business School and the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

Likewise for his colleague, Mr Darren Lim, who graduated from SOA in 2005. He joined HSBC's Investment Banking department as an analyst last year.

Despite stiff competition, he clinched the job thanks to SMU's "excellent and flexible" learning structure. "I was allowed to attend classes that were outside my course curriculum. For example, investment banking classes, which paid off greatly in my interview," said Mr Lim. "Perhaps more importantly, SMU has taught me to think for myself."

Much of the credit for SOA's lineup of achievers goes to its dean, Associate Professor Pang Yang Hoong, who has been the "chief nurturer" of SOA's students from its inception. It begins with SMU's admissions criteria and goes all the way to excellence in teaching, explained Mr Pang.

She maintains an "open door" policy so that students can approach her and other lecturers "at any time and about anything."

Small wonder then that SOA has been consistently winning the university's Teaching Excellence Award since it was instituted in 2005.

"This underlines the significance and importance that the dean puts on teaching," offered Mr Alan Goh, head of undergraduate admissions at SMU. "Teaching is our raison d'être — it cannot be compromised — we constantly push the frontiers when it comes to teaching, which is why we see leaders emerging from SMU," he said.

BRIGHT BUNCH: (From left) Associate Professor Pang Yang Hoong with SMU valedictorians Kexin Lim, Lim Kong Wee and Darren Lim.