Learn FAST, implement FAST

It was a rainy Saturday morning and associate professor Annie Koh, who had been waiting at the remote shipyards of Keppel Offshore and Marine (O&M) for the past hour since 5am, was clearly out of her element.

Koh, dean of executive education at the Singapore Management University (SMU), had something important to do. With only a few days’ notice, Koh, along with a few other universities and consultancies, was asked to pitch for the mandate to run a new series of programmes for Keppel O&M’s executives.

Previously put off by the early Saturday morning presentation request, the representative from one of SMU’s competitors did not even show up, having chosen to adhere to the five-day work routine. Despite the delay and the rain, Koh kept her cool, waited and finally went ahead with her presentation to Choo Chiu Beng, chairman and CEO of Keppel O&M. The following week, when she arrived at work, she was told the good news: SMU got the job.

The story continued at SMU’s city campus. This time around, the Keppel executives undergoing training were also out of their element. Instead of wearing their usual coveralls and safety helmets, they were in long-sleeve shirts and ties. Instead of making project presentations to a panel that included Koh and Choo on how to improve staff retention at the company, they were in a classroom, sitting in. The participants — the bosses of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — can do with that extra bit of formal and further business education too.

While many SME bosses might have picked up survival skills and honed their street smarts as they slugged at their own businesses, they can still benefit from a short, structured programme.

In July, SMU will commence an 18-day Executive Management Programme for SMEs, with support from SPRING Singapore, the government agency in charge of nurturing SMEs. Even before the programme has started, Koh already knows how to gauge its success. Participants will have the opportunity to present their business proposals to not just SMU faculty members alone, but also a panel of bankers and investors, who will be invited to sit in. The participants will also be asked to pitch growth and expansion plans of their own companies, instead of presenting hypothetical case studies. The litmus test will be whether the bankers are convinced enough to lend the money, says Koh.

Russian MBA partner?

While SMU is positioning itself as a business university, its expanding line-up of programmes (both at the under- and post-graduate level) is sorely lacking what other business schools see as their core offering — a Master’s in Business Administration.

SMU is taking it as a matter of utmost importance to offer an MBA programme as it wants to ensure that the programme — tentatively scheduled for launch next year — is unique and relevant.

"An MBA programme will get us into the rankings and, by extension, the international profile," says Koh. In the latest Financial Times ranking, both the Nanyang Technological University and the National University of Singapore were placed in the table, but SMU, with no MBA programme to speak of, did not figure at all.

Based on her observations and anecdotal evidence, Koh notes that MBA programmes are likely to enjoy greater popularity. "After getting an MBA, an executive will become more professional, more marketable and more mobile," she says. In contrast, an executive-education programme represents a much shorter and cheaper investment. "Many corporate clients don’t mind investing, but they want to see returns on investment," she says.

Koh, for corporate education, we really need industry partners; we cannot just rely on the universities alone.

Meanwhile, Koh will continue to focus on growing SMU’s executive-education programmes. For the year to March, some 2,500 people have gone through the programmes at SMU. In the current market, such programmes are likely to enjoy greater popularity. "After getting an MBA, an executive will become more professional, more marketable and more mobile," she says. In contrast, an executive-education programme represents a much shorter and cheaper investment. "Many corporate clients don’t mind investing, but they want to see returns on investment," she says.

As at March, some 2,500 people had gone through the executive-education programmes at SMU.