Swiss business school plans to grow further in Singapore

HSG wants to help meet MNCs’ demand for executives

By LEE U-WEN

NOT many Singaporeans will have heard of the University of St Gallen, but it has been quietly building a presence in the local private education market, with plans under way to grow its base here even further.

The Swiss business school, often referred to by its acronym HSG, has even caught the eye of the Singapore government. In March this year, former deputy prime minister Tony Tan led a delegation to study HSG’s model as part of his work as adviser to the committee overseeing the expansion of the local tertiary sector.

HSG has a hub office in Singapore, set up two years ago and located at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at Singapore Management University (SMU).

What’s more, it was a Singaporean academic, Li Choy Chong, who was instrumental in establishing the Singapore hub. A professor of international management at HSG, he has worked at the university for 12 years and only recently stepped down as head of the Singapore office, having taken up a new appointment at HSG’s Asia research centre in Switzerland.

The man now running the Singapore office, Klaus Spremann, says Singapore has much in common with Switzerland, and he hopes to tap both countries’ strengths in research, education, banking and tourism during his tenure.

On how HSG’s presence here is a mutually beneficial one, Prof Spremann, who is also director of the Swiss Institute of Banking and Finance at HSG, says the university can help feed the growing demand for executives by multinational companies that have set up shop in Singapore.

"(HSG) develops unique and recognised methods for service management, leadership, banking and tourism," he told BT.

“I think Singapore universities and HSG should develop these fields of management together in the coming years. Both countries can do so, since they are not directly competing in the global economy. My plans are to promote possible forms of cooperation on the level of academic research and teaching.”

There is a reason why HSG has not been as prominent as other top foreign universities that have ventured into Asia, and it has to do with funding, says Prof Spremann.

When assessing the standing of a university, the quality of research and teaching must be distinguished from “shininess and global presence of the university in the media”, he said.

“In Switzerland, universities have not levied fees so far. The expenses are funded within the governmental budget. The same is true for many other countries in Europe. There has never been the urge to advertise and to market teaching activities in order to fund the university,” he said.

"Even the best universities in Europe have not promoted their services, different from universities elsewhere where revenues from students play a major role. We should, however, not judge quality from the degree of marketing. Things are changing, of course. HSG is starting to show its excellence.”

HSG’s links with SMU have borne much fruit. So far, more than 130 SMU undergraduates have flown to St Gallen to spend a semester there as part of their global learning programme.

HSG students are also part of the “Asia Term” programme, under which they can come and spend a term at SMU — with their lecturers — to immerse themselves in Asian culture and experiences.

SMU is not the only local university with an HSG tie-up. Nanyang Technological University has two post-graduate double degree courses, with students able to study for their Masters at both institutions.