An MBA with a difference
SMU's new programme focuses on soft skills

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IT MAY have set itself apart from the other local universities by adopting American-style practices, but for its latest offering, the Singapore Management University (SMU) will be taking the cues from its European counterparts instead.

Its new Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme features a core that is heavy on soft skills such as communication, negotiation and leadership — more often associated with European business schools than those in the United States — which is what the SMU believes some MBA-seekers are now looking for.

"The school is more European and we think the market will receive it better," said SMU provost and deputy president Tan Chin Tiong at the programme's launch yesterday.

"People are becoming leaders in about five to six years after they finish their MBA. They need soft skills and this programme is designed for this time and market."

Setting up an MBA programme had always been part of SMU's plans since it started eight years ago, but the university had chosen to concentrate on building up its undergraduate programmes and faculty before venturing to offer an MBA.

Having spent the past few years expanding its range of executive courses, the university also had the opportunity to gather feedback from executives on what they felt was lacking in existing MBA programmes.

"Also, 2003 to 2005 were bad years for MBA programmes, and a lot of universities were cutting down. The sector has gotten more robust lately, and with Asia being more in the spotlight, the timing is perfect," said MBA programme director Doris Sohmen-Pao.

The school has chosen to offer an intensive course to be completed full-time in 12 months, or 16 months for those opting for the Flex-time programme.

In comparison, Nanyang Technological University's full-time MBA takes 16 months to complete, while the National University of Singapore's programme takes 17 months, or 12 months if students forgo internships and overseas exchanges.

"We have learnt that for many professionals out there, it is very difficult to take two years off to do an MBA," said Professor Tan. "There is opportunity cost involved. European programmes have been more successful because one can do an MBA in one year and go back into the same job market."

At $53,800 and $49,800 for its Flex and full-time programmes respectively, the course does not come cheap. But the university is confident its offering will be attractive even though it does not have an established track record.

"It is more expensive, but we are offering a premium programme," said Prof Tan.

The NUS MBA costs between $34,000 and $40,000, while that at NTU ranges from $28,000 to $32,000.

For Mr K Devarak, 35, who is seeking an MBA qualification, the programme's newness is its selling point.

"It means it has no baggage about how things are done, it's creating its own path," said the civil servant.