Business at a global pace

That's what this dean hopes to teach students at SMU business school

LOH CHEE KONG
cheekong@mediacorp.com.sg

The story of how the Singapore Management University (SMU) has grown from scratch to now holding its own against not just the more established universities here, but also the top regional institutions, continues to fascinate observers.

And eight years after it was incorporated as Singapore's third publicly-funded university, the SMU — through its flagship Lee Kong Chian School of Business (LKCSB) — is ready to embark on its next phase of development: Injecting a global dimension to its undergraduate curriculum while expanding its graduate programmes.

And there is hardly anyone more suitable to lead the charge than former diplomat, Professor Pang Eng Fong, who has been LKCSB's dean since June 2006.

"What we are trying to provide is a total learning environment in which students get exposure internally within the SMU, nationally within Singapore and internationally," said Professor Pang, who has served as ambassador to South Korea and the European Community.

Since its inception, the SMU has placed great emphasis on inculcating students with leadership skills and social conscience. And it is now championing the concept of a new business graduate: A societal leader who possesses an appreciation of the interconnectedness of global business and one who is equally at home in any country.

With a third of its students sent on semester-long exchange programmes with more than 140 universities worldwide, the SMU is looking to increase that proportion to "50 per cent or even higher".

Besides encouraging students to apply for internships to countries such as China and India, the school has also embarked on "global business study missions" to places such as Russia, the Middle East and Scandinavia.

"These missions are very serious things. It is not a holiday," Professor Pang asserted.

Recalling one such "fantastic" visit to Israel last year, Professor Pang said: "Not only did we get a sense of social, economic and cultural life in Israel, we visited a number of high-tech companies. The students brought back ideas to Singapore. Some even tried to become traders for Israeli products."

Many students are also involved in regional or international community projects, said Professor Pang.

While market conditions can change rapidly these days, Professor Pang stressed that these additional tracks, which could "change over time", would give students the competitive edge over their peers.

SMU now runs 11 graduate programmes, including masters in applied finance and wealth management. And come August, it will roll out its inaugural Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme. It also offers two research-oriented doctoral programmes in information systems and economics respectively.

While no details have been finalised, Professor Pang said there are plans to expand the number of such programmes that would see its intake of graduate students increase from about 400 to 2,000.

While the university could add a few more schools, Professor Pang, who is also Vice-Provost for academic strategic planning, reiterated that it would not dilute its business core. He said: "A business management university could put other things, such as law, on the side, but it must be business-related disciplines. We won't go into engineering or biology."

"And because the business school is the flagship school, it is important that it succeeds — that is why we are putting these efforts into making sure we have the capacity in terms of faculty and we have the right mix of students."