New president Arnoud De Meyer is brimming with ideas to take the young university places, reports LEE U-WEN

SMU has most of the building blocks in place to produce graduates who can develop solutions for an increasingly globalised society, says Prof De Meyer.

SMU's new president

HAVING left a university with an 800-year history to take on the new president of Singapore Management University (SMU), says that one of the great things about helming a young institution is the lack of fear when it comes to change.

"There is a fear of a legacy here, so people are not that upset when you want to try something new or do something differently," says the 56-year-old scholar as he outlines his goals for his five-year term.

There is a great opportunity here because we’re not so entrenched. We can perhaps be more adventurous than others.

Professor De Meyer is the fourth president of SMU, having just completed a four-year stint as the director of Cambridge University’s prestigious Judge Business School in the United Kingdom.

Prior to that, he was the founding director of the regional graduate business school insead’s Asia campus in Singapore.

During that time, he served on the Singapore Economic Review Committee and the boards of both Sentosa Island Corporation and the Infocomm Development Authority.

The Belgian national, who moved here from Europe in 1984, says that having this experience and being able to function without being a more research-driven institution.

"The changes are largely for the better. People are wealthier. There is more competition - you see it in the MBS trains. You now have the two integrated resources at Marina Bay and Sentosa, there’s greater physical infrastructure all over the island," he says.

Many foreigners, especially from his native Europe, have taken root in Singapore as opposed to just serving his native Europe, have taken root in Singapore as opposed to just serving their Research Institutes of Advanced Technology (RIATs) and their region’s ongoing drive to attract high-end talent.

"For instance, global logistics need to be managed from Europe, but now what many have chosen to do is to have some of them here in Asia. Foreign talent is here in a big way, and we see the many opportunities opening up," he says.

SMU’s faculty, he adds, will be a major pay-off in the region’s ongoing drive to attract high-end talent.

"Just six or seven years ago, the university was 70 per cent local and 30 per cent international. Today, about half are locals and half are overseas. I am looking to double that. There are already some who can stand out of the box. We hope to be a top-tier university."

The vacancy, in his opinion, is most of the building blocks in place to produce graduates who can develop solutions for an increasingly globalised society.

"I’m a strong believer in inter-disciplinary research and education. As long as our different schools in SMU are able to work with one another and talk to one another, we can better listen to the problems of businesses and come up with answers for them," he says.

Today, some 40 per cent of the 7,000-strong undergraduate population are pursuing double degrees, which open up more avenues to interact with people in other disciplines.

"How SMU can stand out from the competition will be its ability to innovate - more specifically, to grow its niche as the top business school in Asia that can pioneer innovative business models for different industries."

It’s a point that he has made several times in the past, most notably in a commentary that he penned for the Financial Times in May this year.

"If the pilot project is good, we will provide the resources and support so that they can start again. If we don’t experiment, how will we come up with new things?"

On its part, the Singapore government has invested heavily in the highly-competitive sector over the years, according to figures from the Ministry of Finance website, the state has spent more than $11 billion in Singapore’s global universities over the past five years.

In his view, Singapore’s three public-funded universities - National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) - along with the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) are among the best that Asia has to offer to the next generation.

"WE want to be one of the most prestigious universities in Asia. In the next five years, we want to have a unique way of doing things that we are doing better."

And while it may be early days yet, Prof De Meyer is already clear about what sort of legacy he wants to leave behind once his term is up.

"First, I want to ensure that we keep investing in our undergraduate programme so that it stands out from the rest and remains attractive to students. We will then grow our graduate degree offerings and triple the number of students here," he says.

"Next, we should look at getting dividends in our research investments such that we are able to build up our credibility and raise awareness of what we can achieve. And last, I hope that SMU can establish itself as a strong Singapore brand that is well known here and internationally."

REFRESHING ENTHUSIASM Above all, Prof De Meyer wants to see the students take ownership of how they want to shape SMU into a globally ranked institution.

"I’ve been surprised by the enthusiasm of the students. They are always full of questions and eager to do things for the university. You don’t see this in many places, and it’s very refreshing for me."