SMU offers liberal arts programme

Students will also get to spend a semester in US liberal arts university

By Liow Si Wan

THE Singapore Management University (SMU) will mark the beginning of its second decade by offering a new liberal education curriculum, a form of academic study that is still lacking in the local tertiary education landscape.

Chosen undergraduates in the course which begins this year will receive a scholarship worth up to $85,000. The curriculum includes mathematics, social sciences, science and regional studies.

SMU’s president, Professor Howard Hunter, said: “Our success in educating students will be measured by whether they have a firm base of knowledge and all the tools to increase that knowledge.”

A liberal education programme is broad-based and rigorous and will nurture critical and creative thinking, with a strong focus on values and ethics, he said.

Students will spend a semester in a liberal arts university in the United States and can obtain a master’s degree during the overall five-year programme.

All SMU students currently have to study core subjects such as ethics, leadership and creative thinking.

Other than offering the liberal arts, Prof Hunter said that SMU would double its doctorate programmes over the next five years. It will also launch an executive Master of Business Administration programme this year to cater to senior executives.

Singapore’s third university is also planning a physical expansion, with a new building for the law school that will include a law library open to the public.

Said Prof Hunter: “We hope to grow the school to accommodate 9,000 to 10,000 students by 2018.”

The school currently has a student population of about 7,000.

The school’s Institute of Service Excellence, which publishes an annual customer satisfaction index, also aims to work with companies to raise service standards.

Industry professionals yesterday welcomed the introduction of a programme teaching the liberal arts.

The director of Republic Polytechnic’s Centre for Culture and Communication, Dr Gan Su-lin - who went through a liberal arts programme at the University of Louisiana - said that unlike many universities in the US, where time is allocated to students to learn things outside of their domain, schools here focus mostly on subjects relevant to the degree.

She said: “My degree was in radio, television and film management, but for the first two years, I studied subjects like astronomy, maths and drugs.”

“Through liberal arts programmes, students can learn more about civility, graciousness and culture.”

Agreeing, the group chief executive officer of maritime group BW Maritime, Mr Andreas Sohmen-Pao, said that liberal arts subjects tend to develop well-rounded individuals.

He said: “Success in business depends on imagination, creativity, and the ability to ‘connect the dots’. These are skills that do not come from deep technical knowledge, but from broad life experiences including arts, languages and history.”

SMU aims to be a great urban university like the London School of Economics and New York University, and collaborations such as those between the Institute of Service Excellence and private companies would help it become one, said Prof Hunter.

Now in his sixth year of service, though initially appointed for a five-year term, Prof Hunter said: “SMU is an integral part of the city and is part of the urban fabric. We plan to be part of both the business community and the cultural life of the historically rich neighbourhood.”