SMU business school invites top foreign researchers

On short stints, they work with faculty here, act as 'conduit to the outside world'

BY LEE U-WEN

SINGAPORE Management University’s (SMU) business school has started a scheme when it invites top researchers from renowned overseas institutions to spend a month or two on its campus.

The aim, says Lee Kong Chian School of Business dean Howard Thomas, is to have such leading researchers in different fields work alongside his own faculty and help "act as a conduit to the outside world".

"It’s a new category of appointment we have created, and these are people from very established institutions in the US and Europe," Professor Thomas told BT in a recent interview. "They come in, work with the faculty here, write papers with them, and they can help us find the right talent that we need."

To date, the school has brought in six academics from institutions such as the University of Texas and New York University in the US and Belgium’s Tilburg University. There are plans to rope in perhaps four more researchers soon.

"These people are not permanent hires, but they will be permanent fixtures in the intellectual world,' said the 67-year-old Brit-Irish-American.

“They act as coaches to the really bright talent that we have, and it’s all part of our efforts to retain and build our young talent.’

The Lee Kong Chian school has been able to attract such top brains to spend time here, even if it’s for only a couple of months a year, because many academics overseas "are intensely curious about what’s happening in Singapore", he said.

"There is this curiosity about Singapore as an educational hub, thanks to the work of the EDB (Economic Development Board) and the Singapore government," said Prof. Thomas.

"Singapore has become an attractive place for foreign institutions to look for partners, and this is very important from our point of view."

In the 18 months since taking up his current job at SMU, the well-travelled said Prof Thomas has been working hard to lure the best brains from around the world to work in his school, a task which he admits has not been an easy one.

"We are going to build the school on people who want to be here. In football speak, we have to build the youth teams and then the second and first teams in order to take us where we want to be in the future," he said enthusiastically.

"I haven’t got the superstars yet, but we will get there. I always believe that if we build the field of dreams, they will come. It will take time for us to do this because the market is such a talent-driven one."

"We don’t want people who are here for their personal gain, we want people who truly want to be at SMU and work as a team."

Despite his round-the-clock efforts to raise the school’s profile locally and overseas, Prof Thomas says he makes sure to set aside time to do what he enjoys best:

"I’ve never stopped doing research...I always believe that you cannot be a dean of a leading research-oriented business school if people can’t say they look up to you as a role model.

— Howard Thomas, dean, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, SMU