Shaping management education in S’pore

The future success of business school instruction here depends on how we embrace our identity and turn being Asian to our advantage.

By Gerard George

During the Asian Management Conclave (AMC) held at Singapore Management University (SMU) last month, dozens of leading business schools in Asia came together to discuss the future of management education. Themed Management Education in Asia: Strategies to Leapfrog, AMC 2015 was jointly organised by SMU and management education think-tank MBAUni­vers. It featured presentations and discussions by thought leaders and researchers from 25 Asian economies, the United States and Europe. The underlying theme was that Asian business schools need to come together to share practices, create new knowledge and collaborate to have a bigger presence on the world stage.

One might observe that the mood of the meeting was to figure out strategies to beat the American and European schools at their own game. Yet much of the debate could turn out to be verbal posturing and not much more. There are three important obstacles.

First, business schools themselves are moulded on Western themes. We emphasise publication in an elite set of (Western) journals as the basic metric of this model of high-research-intensive knowledge production. Most Asian schools do not have the means or the mindset to compete in this rather narrowly defined race. In fact, there is much introspection on whether emphasis on basic research is the best way to distinguish our place in the global market. The reticence for practice is whether it’s even accepted globally that we’ve reached the same level of knowledge creation.

Second, the institutional arrangement, in the form of business school rankings, disadvantage placements in lower-income countries because salary in US dollars is often lower in countries in Asia. Given that advancement and placement often count for 45 per cent of the ranking methodology, it is unlikely that any of the Asian schools would be able to get any top ranking even if it was adjusted for purchasing power parity.

Finally, there is a shift towards global business schools where American or European schools open campuses in Asia and Africa. The trend is to accentuate the number of internationally mobile students by giving them global perspectives to compete in different regions and understand local cultural nuances.

What globalisation does is that it job-burly and gently discourages the localisation of education by shifting managerial and academic attention elsewhere. Business schools pursue a global presence, quite possibly at the cost of a local identity.

Considering these issues, perhaps the ethos has been that we embrace our identity and turn being Asian to our advantage. This thinking is optimistic. Considering these issues, perhaps the ethos has been that we embrace our identity and turn being Asian to our advantage.

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Regional outlook

For our students and faculty to excel, we need to encourage more movement of students for internships and short-term work placements so that we develop future leaders who are versatile and have deep understanding of global (and Asian) markets.

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