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Classes in SMU's postgraduate programmes are held in small seminar-style classrooms, encouraging greater interaction between students and with the course material. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

Move over, STEM majors: soft skills are where the money is.

There is no doubting the importance of the skills that come from a specialised education. However, graduates' soft skills are becoming increasingly important factors in employers' hiring decisions, regardless of field.

In 2009, Google launched a year-long study called Project Oxygen, in hopes of identifying the qualities common to their best-performing employees. The company would then adopt practices that nurtured the growth of these qualities in their staff.

Three years later, the measures recommended by Project Oxygen had been adopted by the majority of Google's upper management, resulting in drastic improvements in their management effectiveness. 75 per cent of their worst-performing managers showed improvement in their performance reviews.

But this is where it gets interesting: among the key eight qualities of Google's top managers, technical skills came in last in priority. What emerged as being more important were qualities like empathy towards one's colleagues, effective communication and critical thinking skills.

"Beyond mastery of knowledge, today's working professional also needs to learn evergreen skills such as communication, teamwork and leadership to navigate change and disruption," says Associate Professor Themis Suwardy, Dean of Postgraduate Professional Programmes at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Ms Eleanor Thorpe, head of human resources and recruiting at Sephora Digital Southeast Asia, concurs.

"Flexibility is your strongest attribute in a fast-changing world," she says. "To make yourself stand out in the future economy, you have to demonstrate your commitment to future learning; to being continually open to change.

"Stronger students have the flexibility to apply what they know. That's what differentiates a stronger candidate from a weaker one."

TURNING THE CLASSROOM ON ITS HEAD

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So how does SMU intend to furnish its students with these crucial “evergreen” skills?

The majority of classes in SMU’s postgraduate programmes, from applied finance to tri-sector collaboration, are taught in an interactive, seminar-style format.



SMU’s postgraduate programmes equip its students with both the technical skills and soft skills they will need to distinguish themselves in the present and future economy. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

Seminars do away with the traditional professor-facing lecture hall. Instead, students and professors discuss course material in a small class-size setting. Studies have shown that a classroom that encourages interaction promotes better engagement with the course material, and therefore better recall and application.

However, the benefits of a seminar-style classroom do not stop there. They extend to the development of critical thinking, interpersonal communication and elocution — precisely the skills that are so sought after by employers.

During class discussions, students are encouraged to participate by offering their own viewpoints, bolstered by the course material. They are also expected to verbally defend their stances with a logical and considered approach, strengthening their critical thinking skills.

At the same time, their perspectives will be challenged by opinions offered by fellow students, forcing them to reconsider what they know.

Mr Terence Quek will personally vouch for the strength of SMU’s pedagogy. A graduate of SMU’s Master of Science in Communication Management (MCM) programme, he co-founded Caelan & Sage, a creative think tank focusing on strategic communications. Over four years, the company grew from a zero-investment company to one with a turnover grossing over \$1 million, which led it to merge with organisation development consultancy Emergenetics Asia in 2012 to form Emergenetics Caelan & Sage.

Today, he is the chief executive of the company’s Asia-Pacific division.

“In my role, I often need to make decisions based on a combination of business, management and communication strategies,” says Mr Quek. “That’s where I felt I have benefited most from the MCM programme, which synergised business and management fundamentals with corporate communication principles as applied in the real world.”

Where classes in other universities might be limited in scope to simply writing essays and pre-class readings, SMU’s curriculum is intended to test its students on a number of different skills, giving them opportunities to perform their own research, collaborate on group projects, and facilitate in-class discussions.

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“Through these, I honed my skills in critical thinking, effective decision-making, collaboration, and building relationships,” says Mr Quek. “As I had to juggle the demands of work and study, I also had to practice self-discipline, perseverance and time management.”

The MCM programme gave Mr Quek some insight into the myriad perspectives of his coursemates and industry professionals, thus giving him the opportunity to reflect on his own decision-making process and leadership style.

“Not only did I receive wide exposure to business, management and communication issues through a collection of real world business cases, but I also got to analyse the decision-making process of business leaders,” he says.



The Postgraduate Development Series, or PDS, is a series of interactive workshops intended to help SMU postgraduate students develop skills outside of their specific disciplines. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

The learning is not limited to the classroom. SMU offers its students the unique opportunity to attend its Professional Development Series (PDS), a suite of interactive workshops intended to help students develop skills outside of their specific disciplines.

Students can choose from an extensive range of workshops on offer, including conflict management, negotiation, the art of giving feedback, design thinking, sustainability, leadership, and innovation.

The PDS also gives SMU’s postgraduate students access to the latest research from the institution, in areas such as data analytics.

“SMU is committed to nurturing graduates who are creative and can be entrepreneurial leaders for the knowledge-based economy,” says Prof Suwarty. “The PDS is instrumental in transforming our students in terms of their world views, competencies, strategic vision, spirit of collaboration and appetite for problem-solving.”

Join us for our SMU Masters Day to discover the next step in your career and personal development, [click here to register](#).