

**D**URING the Asian Management Conclave (AMC) held at Singapore Management University (SMU) last month, deans 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 MBAUniverse.com. It featured presentations and discussions by thought leaders and executives from 15 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 this meeting was to figure out strategies to beat the American and European schools at their own game. Yet much of this bravado could turn out to be verbal posturing and not much more. There are three important obstacles.

► First, business schools themselves are modelled on a Western theme. We emphasise publication in an elite set of (Western) journals as the basic litmus test of this model of highly resource-intensive knowledge production. Most Asian schools do not have the resources or the toolkit to compete in this rather narrowly defined race. In fact, there is much introspection on whether emphasis on basic research for an applied field (such as business) is relevant for practice or whether it's even socially optimal that all schools pursue the same model of knowledge creation.

► Second, the reputational sweepstakes in the form of business school rankings disadvantage placements in lower-income countries because salary in US dollars is often lower in several Asian economies. Given that salaries and placement often count for 40-50 per cent of the ranking methodology, it is unlikely that any of the rising Asian schools would bridge this gap anytime soon 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, Africa and South America. The trend is to increase the number of internationally mobile executives by giving them a global perspective to compete in different regions and understand local cultural nuances – and the reputational game implicitly encourages a global brand presence.

What globalisation does is that it subtly and gently discourages the localisation of education by shifting managerial and scholarly attention elsewhere. Business schools pursue a global presence, quite possibly at the cost of a local commitment. Considering these issues, perhaps the poignant and yet unspoken question is: should Asian business schools be joining this global, reputational game?

This begs the question what our strategy for management education should be for Singapore's fine institutions. In Singapore, the ethos has been that we compete for global talent and we try to get the best faculty to create and sustain a globally competent university system. In order to deliver top-notch educational content, we need to fight the talent war as best as we can. There is no second-guessing this premise because we have to continue to deliver management education to a stand-



#### REGIONAL OUTLOOK

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PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

# 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**

ard that sustains the future competitiveness of Singapore. However, there are different ways to achieve that goal.

First, to succeed, we need to embrace our Asian identity. The region continues to enjoy its fair share of successes. We need to build on the successes and idiosyncrasies of our region by developing unique knowledge content through case studies of business practices and cultures as well as supportive social networks.

For our students and faculty to excel, we need to encourage free movement of students for internships and short-term work placements so that we develop future executives and entrepreneurs who are versatile and have deep knowledge of how Asian (and Asean) markets operate. This model will also help students understand placement and career prospects within these economies clearly.

As AMC 2015 revealed, we have to build closer ties between our business schools so that faculty can develop shared knowledge not just disseminated through journal research. At a societal level, this also implies that parents seriously consider

sending their children to Singapore universities – which hold themselves well against the best in the world – before we send them packing to other universities abroad. It is imperative that the future success of our management education relies on how we embrace our identity and how we can turn being Asian to our advantage.

#### Leverage connections

While many business school scholars have distanced themselves considerably from industry practice in the name of academic research, we have to leverage our corporate and policy connections to identify and address problems that are relevant for industry and society in a more targeted and effective manner.

To do so, we need two important pieces in place. We need stronger connections with the industry and policy communities, and we need fluidity of movement between the two in the form of job secondments, joint research programmes and continuing education. Having a city campus has benefited SMU significantly in the quality of interactions, internship and job

placement opportunities for our students. The campus is a lot more connected with industry and government. Our students especially benefit when experienced executives teach alongside our research faculty – it builds both scholarly credibility and practical relevance.

At SMU's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, there is a separate practice track for senior industry professionals as well as the standard research and education tracks for our faculty. At the same time, the Centre for Management Practice at SMU has the Corporate Immersion Programme that systematically facilitates temporary placements of SMU's faculty in industry for a short period to develop new skills, understand novel industry problems, and collect data for research.

In reverse, there are also opportunities for industry experts to spend some time in a university setting to work together with excellent minds to develop new ideas for use within their work environment. For government employees, there is also an opportunity to upgrade their skills in research, analysis and evaluation of global

practices. Whether the flow of movement is from industry to university or the other way around, the goal is to make the boundaries of the university more porous. The added benefit of this model is to make the university locally (and regionally) embedded, while making it globally competitive.

While there is much discussion on the potentially disruptive role of technology, it remains a tool for change rather than the reason for change. Technology provides new models to collaborate and deliver content, but it does not replace the need for content.

#### Intellectual curiosity

Perhaps a substantive part of what is taught in a regular course can be replicated with technology, but there is a big part that cannot yet be taught online or through a phone app – which remains the university's margin of excellence and its intellectual curiosity to ask questions and generate new knowledge.

Business schools have the opportunity to reaffirm their roles as providers of high-quality education by renewing themselves via embracing their Asian identity, embedding themselves deeper in the practice and policy communities, and making the boundaries of the university porous.

If we truly want to create business schools that Singapore is proud of, we need a lot more than for the university to step up – we need industry and government to pitch in to do more and, together, build up the intellectual capital for Singapore.

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