

SMU's move to diversify is a positive step

THE recent announcement by the Singapore Management University (SMU) to expand beyond being a business-focused institution is a move in the right direction – both for itself as well as for the wider higher-education landscape in Singapore.

The university has said that it plans to set up a school of humanities in the next few years, where undergraduates will be able to study subjects such as history, literature and philosophy. SMU also suggested it will offer a full degree course in applied mathematics and may consider a liberal arts programme and residential college in the future.

These constitute a progressive step for SMU that will take the university beyond the US-styled private business school it originally set out to be. To be sure, it would be unfair to compare SMU with any of these American business schools as a significant part of their reputation and credibility has been built through their post-graduate MBA and executive-level programmes. It is through such programmes too that these business schools have been able to

build substantial and affluent alumni networks that have contributed generously to the endowment of the schools. Singapore currently has at least four well established business schools – French institution Insead, the Essec Business School, as well as business schools from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological

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University (NTU). There are other smaller schools as well. For a relatively small potential student base in Singapore and the region, SMU may find itself in an increasingly crowded and perhaps saturated pool. Its move to expand its scope of offerings may thus also make good strategic sense.

It is also noteworthy that many of the other specialised business schools – and not only in Singapore – operate within the framework of a broad university. The diversity of a student population on campus is a key factor that enriches the undergraduate experience and fosters richer learning – something that SMU can also achieve as it ex-

pands its programmes in multiple disciplines. More disciplines could also lead to wider choices for SMU in terms of partnerships and joint programmes with reputable universities from around the world. It would no longer be confined to partnering only other business schools.

At the national level, SMU's possible move to create a liberal arts programme and residential college would add to the efforts underway to build a more diversified and creative workforce, from which employers, too, would benefit. The Yale-NUS college and the NUS residential colleges have been successful models and have helped not only to enrich campus life but also to enable undergraduates to enter the workforce better prepared with more varied skills.

Thus, SMU would help meet the expanding aspirations of young Singaporeans. The greater the diversity of courses available to students at home – which will hopefully be accompanied by a greater availability of scholarships – the less likely they would be to look overseas for higher education. To some extent, this could also prevent, or at least reduce, a brain drain in the future.