

# Adding diversity to the university scene

First there were two. Then the third came along in 2000. Today, there are six universities. With stiffer competition for students, each is now building up niche strengths, with some offering residential and overseas stints to all students.



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**A**-LEVEL school leavers and polytechnic graduates applying for a university place this year are faced with the difficult but happy problem of having to choose from a range of higher education options.

Parents are also struck by the myriad of choices available. Madam R. Saroja, an alumnus of National University of Singapore whose son is applying for a university place this year said: "When I applied to university in the 80s, it was just NUS or NTU (Nanyang Technological University), which was then Nanyang Technological Institute, and did only engineering."

"And since I wanted to do an arts degree, the only university I could go to was NUS."

"Compare that to my son who wants to do engineering or business, or combine both. He has six universities and 12 different degrees to choose from and all of them sound good. I wish I was back in university."

As recently as 14 years ago, there were only NUS and NTU. Singapore's third university, Singapore Management University, began taking in students in 2000.

From the word go, SMU competed as an upstart with established players and got them to re-think what they themselves were doing.

Ironically, when SMU was first conceived, it was modelled on the established NUS and NTU.

The initial plan was for NTU's business students to go to SMU, while NUS gradually reduced its business intake.

NTU was to award degrees to SMU students until the new university acquired a charter to grant its own.

## New approach

BUT the Government did an about turn in 1999, just one year before its opening, and announced that SMU, which had tied up with the American Wharton Business School, would award its own degrees, and all three universities would compete for students.

The thinking was that competition never hurt anyone, and if SMU was successful, the others would want to change too.

Faced with the challenge of establishing its own identity from the start, SMU chose deliberately to differentiate itself from NUS and NTU.

Unlike the two established universities, which then admitted students based on examination re-

sults, SMU used a broad range of criteria when it admitted its first batch of students.

This included panel interviews, a reflective essay, and applicants' other qualities and achievements.

The new university also moved to address the old complaint from employers - that local graduates could not think on their feet and were afraid to speak up.

It did this by adopting an American-style of teaching students in small seminar groups and giving marks to students for class participation.

It worked.

Five years later, in 2005, when the first batch of SMU students were out in the workforce, companies were already talking about the "SMU difference".

Employers interviewed by the media said SMU graduates were indeed different - they were articulate, confident and mature.

And it wasn't just hype, going by the results of the university's first graduate employment survey.

Two-thirds of the pioneer class of 309 students were polled for the survey.

All landed jobs within six months of graduation, with more than half reporting that they had found jobs even before graduating. Three-quarters received two or more job offers. Their average annual starting salary was \$32,500.

Recruiters such as Mr David Leong, who heads People Wide Consulting, note that more than a decade later, employers still talk about SMU students being different.

Even Attorney-General Steven Chong, who attended the ground-breaking for the university's law school building earlier this week, observed that SMU graduates were "more engaging, more prepared to speak up".

It is not necessarily the case that they are always right, "but they probe, they ask, they question", he said.

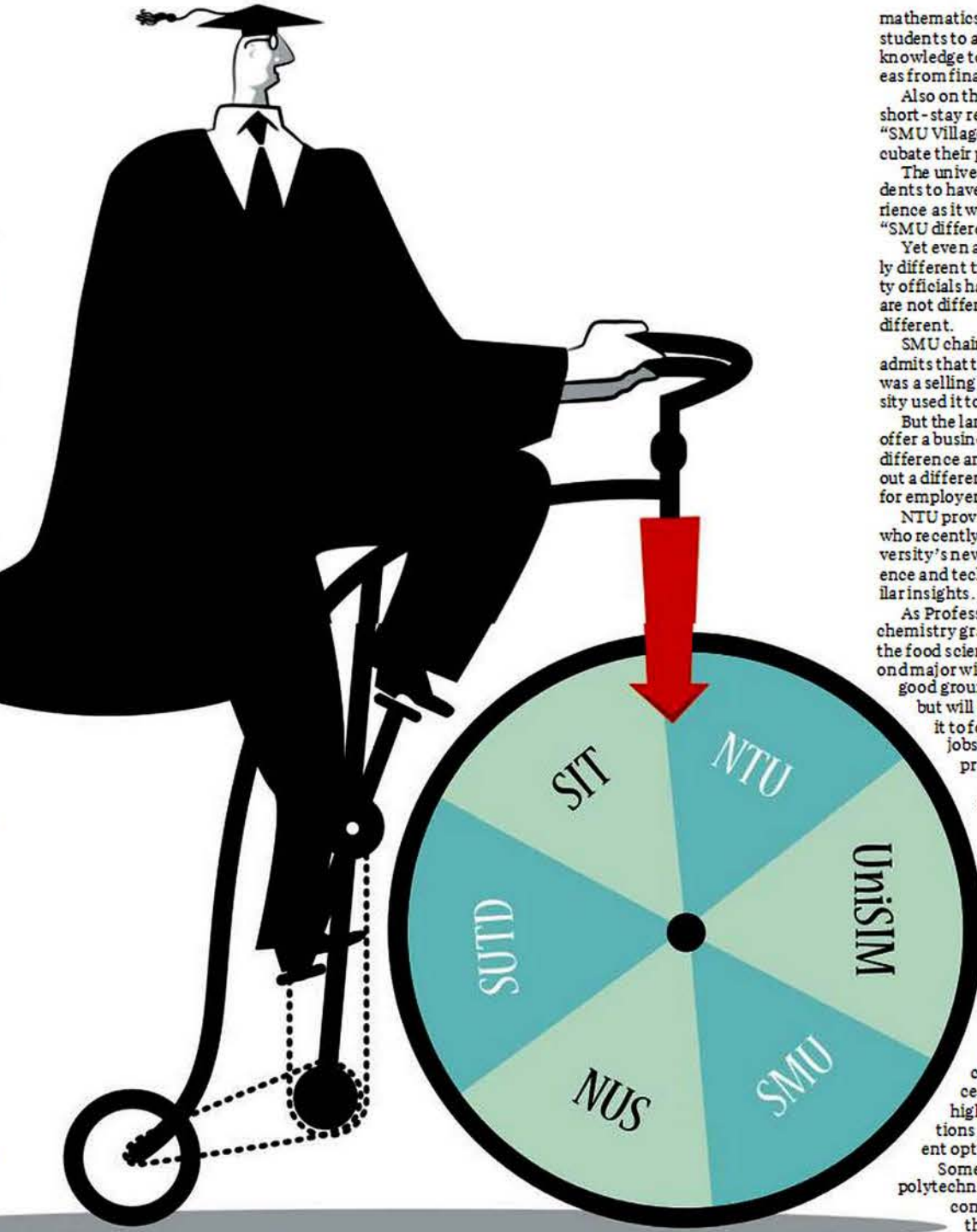
The university started off charging the same fees as NUS and NTU but later raised it, surpassing the two more established universities. Today, it still charges a premium.

## Forced out of the box

WITH SMU posing a challenge, NUS and NTU dons were also forced to think about how they could differentiate themselves to keep drawing in the best students.

NUS used its high worldwide ranking to its advantage and formed university alliances to offer its students exposure overseas.

As it ramped up its research, it



also built overseas colleges in 10 locations around the world, including Silicon Valley, Stockholm and Israel to nurture entrepreneurs.

Three years ago, NUS opened parts of its University Town at the former Warren Golf Club site in Clementi to give students a residential college experience.

The Yale-NUS liberal arts college commenced classes last year.

NTU's direction was initially less clear as it moved to offer programmes in the social sciences, digital media and fine arts.

But more recently, NTU has sharpened its science and technology focus.

It has ramped up research and set up several labs including the Future Mobility Research Lab, set up with BMW Group to study future transportation.

As the world's largest single-campus engineering facility, turning out more than 2,000 graduates a year, NTU has also inno-

ated in engineering education.

The university has launched the Renaissance Engineering programme, combining the study of engineering with business and liberal arts.

Students get to spend a year at one of the partner universities before they take up internships at start-ups and companies abroad.

It is not surprising then that NTU is fast climbing the university league tables.

Seeing how differentiation worked for SMU, the Singapore University of Technology and Design, the Singapore Institute of Technology and SIM University all started with a differentiated model.

SUTD's unique selling point was its partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US and China's Zhejiang University, combining the best of East and West.

Another innovative feature is

its curriculum, which marries engineering, architecture and design training.

More recently, the Government announced the expansion of the Singapore Institute of Technology and SIM University.

Their offerings too will be different in that the focus will be on applied hands-on learning.

Work internships will be a big part of their curriculum to prepare students well for the job market.

## The future

SMU, as it prepares to celebrate its 15th anniversary next year, has come up with new offerings in the humanities, including history, literature and philosophy to broaden the undergraduate education for all its students.

The university also wants to offer a full degree course in applied

mathematics, a field which trains students to apply mathematical knowledge to solve problems in areas from finance to genomics.

Also on the cards is a short-stay residential college, or "SMU Village", for students to incubate their project ideas.

The university wants all its students to have the residential experience as it will help to build the "SMU difference".

Yet even as they grow in slightly different trajectories, university officials have stressed that they are not differentiating just to be different.

SMU chairman Ho Kwon Ping admits that the "SMU difference" was a selling point and the university used it to its advantage.

But the larger objective was to offer a business education with a difference and in the process turn out a different type of graduate for employers.

NTU provost Freddy Boey, who recently announced the university's new course in food science and technology, also had similar insights.

As Professor Boey said: "So a chemistry graduate who takes up the food science course as a second major will not just have a good grounding on chemistry, but will also be able to apply it to food science and find jobs in the growing food processing industry."

"Similarly, a student from the Renaissance Engineering programme will have a grounding in engineering and business and the entrepreneurial mindset honed in Silicon Valley or the hubs in Europe."

A-level holders and polytechnic graduates who are currently in the process of weighing their higher education options welcome the different options.

Some like Madam Saroja's polytechnic graduate son S. Raj confess to having to think hard about their choices.

"I have pared down my choices to seven courses in three universities, but even now I find it hard to choose as each of them have something unique about them," he said.

From the Government's point of view, it makes sense to encourage differentiation and diversity in the higher education sector as it focuses public resources on what institutions do best.

But this must be done carefully to ensure that it does not become an exercise in signalling differing merit, value or worth to the institutions - such as the simplistic classification of universities as research-intensive or teaching universities.

No doubt this has led to some friendly competition and rivalry, but instead of competing head-on in the same area, it has spurred universities to build on their unique strengths and aim for different peaks.

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