



Prof Srivastava and Prof Pang see the new approach as helping SMU students broaden their understanding of different disciplines and issues, on top of having "depth" in their chosen majors. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Varsity goes for 'blended learning'

THE Singapore Management University (SMU) has started fusing online learning into its undergraduate classes.

But it has no plans for now to offer "massive open online courses", unlike the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University. Both are offering such courses with US-based education provider Coursera.

SMU's focus is still very much on face-to-face teaching and interaction, an integral part of the SMU approach, said its vice-provost (undergraduate) Pang Yang Hoong.

In fact, to free up more "interactive" time in class, SMU has been experimenting with "blended learning", which combines classroom instruction with online curricula, since 2012. For instance,

Associate Professor Tan Swee Liang, who teaches a course on international economics, has used apps and a conferencing tool called WebEx in some classes. In August, she will be replacing some sessions with online classes.

Mr Mok Heng Ngee, a senior instructor at SMU's School of Information Systems, has converted lecture content into videos for students to watch.

His students also do quizzes before going for in-person lessons that are used more for group activities like discussion and problem solving.

Last September, 19 of its faculty members set up a group to research new ways of learning such as e-learning. They also conduct workshops for colleagues on online teaching and study its effectiveness.

AMELIA TENG

SMU to broaden learning for freshmen

Those enrolling in August next year will go through revamped syllabus

By AMELIA TENG

FRESHMEN entering the Singapore Management University (SMU) in August next year will go through a revamped syllabus, in the university's bid to broaden what students learn.

Undergraduates will take modules from a wider range of topics, and these courses will make up nearly half their degree programme.

SMU provost and deputy president Rajendra K Srivastava told The Straits Times in an interview on Tuesday that the new ap-

proach aims to help students broaden their understanding of different disciplines and issues, on top of having "depth" in their chosen majors.

Currently, students take 16 modules that fall outside their specialisation. Except for six university-wide modules on topics such as ethics and leadership, they can choose the rest from any school.

From next year, freshmen will be required to take the same number of modules - but from a wider range of topics.

They must take at least one course from eight "clusters".

These include entrepreneurship, technology studies, modes of thinking, globalisation studies, Asian studies and general education. Some of these courses will be offered in August this year.

Said vice-provost (undergraduate) Pang Yang Hoong: "The 'clusters' are broad bodies of knowledge that our graduates should have, so that they have a more holistic education."

One of the "clusters" is made up of foundational modules such as academic writing and calculus; another consists of existing university-wide courses.

Professor Srivastava said freshmen pursuing different degrees will then have a "common base of knowledge".

The existing curriculum allows

students to choose more modules in a field that they are strong in, he said, and avoid others they are unsure of. They may end up being well-versed in only one or two areas, he added.

Mr Elijah Hum, 21, who has a place to read economics at SMU this year, likes the sound of the new syllabus requirements.

"Friends in university tell me scoring well is important to maintain a good grade point average. So they choose modules they're comfortable with," he said.

But looking at the big picture, it may be better for students to take a more diverse range of courses "because you never know what you will learn that can be useful for working life", he added.

Set up in 2000, SMU is produc-

ing its 10th batch of graduates this year. It has an annual freshmen intake of 1,950 across six schools including Information Systems Management, Social Sciences and Accountancy.

Prof Srivastava, who has been provost for nearly six years, said the big difference between the last decade and the next is the "volatility and uncertainty", not just in the economic world but in other areas.

So graduates must be prepared to adapt, he said, adding: "The world changes quite a bit and if you look at companies like Google and Facebook, they either didn't exist or had very few employees 10 years ago."

He said SMU will continue in its efforts to produce graduates

who are ready for work, through internships and other means.

It is also ramping up its overseas programmes so that all students will soon have overseas exposure, through initiatives such as exchange programmes, internships and study trips.

Some 85 per cent of its students went abroad last year, up from about 75 per cent in 2012. Prof Srivastava said SMU hopes to raise this to 100 per cent in the next three years.

SMU also hopes to secure more funds to help students go abroad.

It has funded 1,348 students for overseas trips in the latest academic year through scholarships, awards, loans, grants and the like.

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