



(From left) Associate professors Lieven Demeester and John Donaldson, Mr Tan Gan Hup, students Zack Chan and Jonathan Tan, and Professor Gary Pan, in a white room at SMU-X, where the walls and floor are for scribbling ideas. There are also rooms for students to catch power naps and for small groups to meet.

# Space for the students, by the students

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Where once there were shelves and shelves of books for sale, there is now in the old MPH building on Stamford Road a white room where the walls and floor are for scribbling ideas.

Another room, where silence is golden, has sofa beds for power naps. There is also a huddle room filled with colourful beanbags for small groups to meet.

It is all part of Singapore Management University's latest learning experiment called SMU-X, which goes into full swing in January.

Open to its students 24 hours, seven days a week, the three-storey former MPH building, which the university has leased for five years and renamed the SMU Labs, will be used to teach elective courses – but with a twist.

Instead of lectures, lessons will be centred on solving real-world problems through projects.

A public policy management course, for instance, may be taught by getting students to work with a social welfare agency to draw up programmes for disadvantaged families.

Professors will guide students through their projects.

The courses, about 10 of which will be launched next year, will be open to all students. Each will offer around 50 places.

Students will earn credits from the semester-long courses and they will be graded on their participation and the final outcome of the project.

SMU students were involved in the planning and design of the rooms. They held focus group discussions, conducted surveys and went overseas to look at facilities in other university campuses.

Mr Tan Gan Hup, associate director in the president's office who headed the setting up of SMU-X,



The old MPH building on Stamford Road, home to the flagship MPH bookstore until 2003, is now leased by SMU, which is using it to teach elective courses where lessons will be centred on solving real-world problems through projects.

said the space has been designed to suit the “millennial student” who is comfortable with technology and wants “the university to keep up with his learning on the go”.

The old red and white conserved building was home to the flagship MPH bookstore until 2003 when it was bought over by Vanguard Interiors.

Undergraduates who have already had a taste of project-based courses said it is the way to go.

Social sciences student Jonathan Tan, 24, who worked on a project to highlight the challenges faced by single-parent families for his policy management course said learning came alive for him.

“You can read widely on the subject and attend lectures, but there’s

nothing like applying all that you have learnt to solving a problem. We went much deeper into the topic and learnt so much more.”

Business student Zack Chan, 24, said usually in class they are given “made-up” problems to solve. “But in this case, it was a real problem that a client, a small company, faced. We had to come up with a more efficient way to purchase materials for its manufacturing process. And keep costs low.”

“When we learnt something new from our professor, we applied it to the project. So we could immediately see the relevance.”

SMU president Arnoud De Meyer said that learning through the new courses can be powerful as it will cross disciplines and give stu-

dents the chance to be creative and experience real-world complexities.

He noted that the university, which was started 14 years ago, is known for doing things differently. It introduced broader admission criteria, an American style of teaching in small seminar groups and gave students marks for speaking up in class.

Now, he hopes that over the next few years, it will become known for SMU-X.

“X can stand for many things – experiential, extra, experimental which can all be applied to the programme. But X also stands for X-factor – that special talent or quality which we hope to nurture in our students through the programme.”

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