

Diplomats share their experiences in culture class

THE scene in this Singapore Management University (SMU) class is not a typical one.

While most classes are made up of mainly local students, this one has an equal number of locals and international students on exchange here.

This was deliberately done to fit the theme of the module called "Global-City Stage - Singapore in the world, the world in Singapore."

The course, which started in January, looks at Singapore's place in the world and its relationships with countries such as Britain and China.

Professor Pang Eng Fong, who co-teaches the module with SMU president Arnoud De Meyer, said: "We wanted it to be a real test of culture."

Even the assignments are set this way. Students have to complete three essays in total - one individually, the second as a pair with an exchange student, and the last as a mixed group of members.

The course, both academics' idea to mark Singapore's golden jubilee this year, was oversubscribed. It attracted more than 100 applicants and took in 63. Most SMU courses have 45 students each.

The course is likely to run for another semester.

It is one of the choices that all SMU undergraduates from its six schools can opt for, under a list of modules that fall outside their specialisations.

“ INFORMAL AND DIFFERENT

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They are required to take 16 such modules, with at least one each from eight clusters such as general education and Asian studies.

Students discuss all sorts of issues, from the concept of free speech, national identity and language, to food and culture.

Veteran diplomats are also part of the class. So far, six - including Singapore's ambassadors-at-large Bilahari Kausikan and Professor Chan Heng Chee - have shared their experiences.

The high commissioners of countries such as Britain and India have also visited.

Prof Pang, Singapore's former ambassador to countries such as Korea and Belgium, told The Straits Times: "The aim is to get students to talk about Singapore from the inside and outside."

"Many international students have stereotypes of Singapore, such as it's illegal to chew gum here. But we are more complex than that."

"We want students to examine each other's viewpoints, and be sensitive to nuances."

At the end of the course, 65 student essays - to mark Singapore's 50th and SMU's 15th anniversary - will be chosen out of 100. These will be compiled into a book that will be launched in the second half of the year.

Ms Elizabeth Fong, 23, a fourth-year law student in the class, said: "Discussions are very informal and it's different to have two faculty members teach it instead of one, as they bring different perspectives."

Clashes of views among students are also learning moments, she said, citing an example of a French student who said she was taken aback by the limits to free speech here.

"She said that free speech in France is a God-given right," said Ms Fong. "We learn to accept other ideas, but we cannot take them wholesale because it doesn't suit our context."

Second-year student Teo Yi Heng, 24, who is reading economics with political science as his second major, said: "We also discuss why Singapore doesn't copy the social policies in Scandinavian countries such as childcare and free university education. It is because we are not them. We don't have the same culture."

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