

# Using stereotypes to teach diversity

By **KOK XING HUI**

A GROUP of 25 university students were told to write about stereotypes that they had heard about various races, religions and sexual preferences on a whiteboard.

They were then made to pick a label that best described them and stand before it.

This was an exercise in a three-hour-long Managing Diversity in Asia class at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The class was introduced at SMU last month and is meant to build students with greater cultural sensitivity when it comes to the differences between people across the globe. Many students were uncomfortable that day, and felt the need to defend the stereotypes associated with their labels.

Mr Ho Jack Yong, assistant director of diversity and inclusion at SMU, said: "It may not have a direct impact on students' employability, but these skills will take you very, very far in life – the ability to connect, to share stories, to empathise, and to be open."

Assistant Professor Hoon

Chang Yau, who started the course with Mr Ho, added that he wanted to see attitude change "because a lot of these are very deep-seated, very deeply embedded in people's value systems".

Both men believe the course to be the first of its kind in a Singapore university.

A check with other universities showed that diversity is taught in some modules, but usually to serve a career goal, such as managing intercultural communication for business.

The course, which is open to all SMU students, counts towards their grade point average.

They are required to take 16 such modules from a list of modules that fall outside their specialisations, with at least one each from eight clusters such as general education and Asian studies.

Dr Hoon said: "We want all our students to be able to see the complexity and the beauty of diversity. What better way to do it if not through curriculum?"

Economics student Divya Sangaraju, 21, chose the course as it discusses issues concerning every-

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one, which she finds "more applicable than politics".

She learnt that while she saw herself as being in the minority, she still had privileges over others – her upper-middle-class background, education and ability to travel. "I realise I have an obligation to give back to society."

The course also tackles power and privilege, gender and sexuality, and Singapore policies on diversity and disability issues.

Students will be taken to places such as the Harmony Centre, which explains the Islamic faith,

and SPD, an organisation representing the disabled.

At the end of the 13-week course, students will put on an exhibition of posters and videos they created to promote awareness on diversity within SMU.

This course ties in with another new diversity initiative by SMU in January, the Diversity Leadership Development Programme, in which students are groomed to be diversity champions on campus.

The 20 students have to submit an essay and be interviewed about their interest in diversity and their hopes for social changes. The nine-month programme is extra-curricular, co-sponsored by the National Integration Council and includes 30 hours of workshops. It culminates in projects with real-world impact that will be evaluated by welfare organisations and corporates.

Dr Hoon said: "The process is never easy; they really struggle. Through every week's activities and every week's readings, their boundaries get pushed a little bit to be that bit more open minded."

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