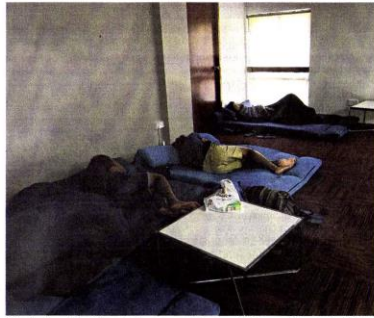
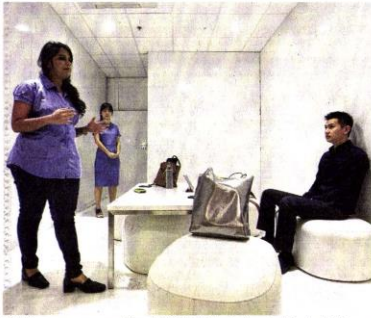


Beyond A levels



SMU-X courses are run at the old MPH building in Stamford Road, which has specially-designed facilities. Students can rehearse a business pitch in the White Room (left), where they can scribble on the walls, floors and even the table during brainstorming. Other rooms are a Quiet Zone for power naps (centre) and a Huddle Room (right) with colourful beanbags for small groups to meet. The building is open to students round the clock. ST PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN

Going to school, learning in the real world

Students taking SMU-X courses get to work with industry partners on real-life problems

Sandra Davie
Senior Education Correspondent

A Singapore Management University (SMU) experiment with a new way of teaching and learning has been a hit with the 600 students who tried it out for a year.

Now to benefit more students, the university will extend the programme called SMU-X to 2,000 stu-

dents a year, which means every SMU undergraduate will be able to take up at least one SMU-X course over the four years of study. Some 100 companies will be roped in as industry partners.

Instead of lectures and seminars, SMU-X courses are centred on projects where student teams, drawn from various disciplines, come up with solutions to real-world problems. 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 and industry mentors guide students through their projects. Students earn credits from the semester-long courses and they are graded on their participation and the final outcome of the project.

SMU-X courses are run at the converted red-and-white building in Stamford Road, which was home to the flagship MPH bookstore until 2003, when it was bought over by Vanguard Interiors. Instead of the usual tutorial or seminar rooms, the facilities in the three-storey build-

ing are specially designed for the way millennial students learn.

The White Room, for example, is a favourite with students for brainstorming sessions. The walls, floors and even the table can be used 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.

The building is open to its students 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

SMU students were involved in the planning and design of the rooms. They held focus group dis-

cussions, conducted surveys and went overseas to look at facilities in other university campuses.

SMU's provost, Professor Lily Kong, noted that SMU-X suits the millennial student who wants the university to keep up with his learning on the go. The facilities are well used through the day, even in the early hours of the morning.

She said: "The hands-on nature of the projects, the interface with the real world, the solving of actual problems in the public, private or people sectors, the flexibility of learning, the opportunity to work and learn at all hours of the day and night in 24/7 facilities - all these

make SMU-X responsive to the learning styles and motivations of the millennial student."

Undergraduates who have already had a taste of project-based courses said it is the way to go. Economics student Cheng Li Yang, 24, who took up the SMU-X course on global migration, got to see first hand a refugee camp in Thailand.

"The course was about migration patterns across the world, and the politics and international relations behind it; it was also about a project that actively contributes to a community of refugees in Thailand."

GETTING REAL continued on B13

SMU-X good for industry partners too

FROM B14

"It was an extremely amazing experience visiting the refugee camp, but... what was most interesting was crafting real-life solutions to real-life problems that these refugees face, and the best part is being part of the solution."

Companies partnering SMU on the projects said they have also gained. One of them is Skyscanner, a leading global travel search site.

Mr Ravish Doctor, manager, growth strategy at Skyscanner, said the four teams that worked on different projects at his company came up with some interesting business ideas.

He said: "I was very impressed with the quality of thinking and maturity in grasping the case study and applying classroom learning to real-life business challenges. The questions they had around our business and operations and their resulting projects sparked great discourse and discussion with our team."

Prof Kong said: "SMU-X is another innovation that recognises the value of experiential learning, where the distance between the classroom and the real world is immediately diminished. This pedagogy further brings us closer to industry, and industry partners appreciate the fresh perspectives to business problems that they face and the opportunity to talent-scout for potential hires."

One in three SMU students indicated that they are likely to work in a similar industry as the company they worked with in an SMU-X course. SMU recently won an MOE Tertiary Education Research Fund to undertake a two-year study on the effectiveness of the SMU-X courses.

sandra@sph.com.sg