

New SMU course: 1,108 vying for 45 places

Combination of politics, law and economics proves a winner; total number of applications up 6% to 14,000

Sandra Davie
Senior Education
Correspondent

A new degree course at Singapore Management University (SMU) which offers a combination of politics, law and economics (PLE) is a hit with young Singaporeans hoping to land a university place this year.

SMU received 1,108 applications for the 45 places in the course, which means about 25 students are vying for every place.

The demand for the new course has also led to a rise in total number of applications – 14,000 in all this year, a 6 per cent rise over last year.

Earlier this year, when SMU announced the new course, its officials likened it to Oxford University's prestigious politics, philosophy and economics course.

It is aimed at giving students a broad understanding of how the world works and will prepare them for a range of careers.

Students who had applied for the course said it is an unusual combination since it includes the study of law with economics and politics – and prestigious to boot as it is being offered to only a select group of high-calibre students.

Many were also drawn by the fact that the course would prepare them for a wide range of jobs, including in journalism, foreign affairs, public service, consulting and research.

SMU provost Lily Kong said she was delighted with the response.

She added: "From all our engagement sessions, it is clear that students, parents and employers recognise the value that the PLE combination of disciplines can bring in preparing graduates who can handle multifaceted careers..."

"Through a deeper understanding of how politics, law and economics intersect to shape the world in which we live, we hope to groom a new generation of leaders and thinkers for Singapore."

The 45 students selected for the course will take all three subjects in the first year, before specialising in one of four areas – global studies, distribution and justice, public policy and governance, or choice and behaviour – from year two.

Students will also have to go on a 10-week internship during which they will work on a project to find solutions to a real-world problem.

SMU said several firms have indicated their interest in offering internships to those on the course. They include the Economic Development Board as well as consultancies like Bain and Company.

SMU officials said close to 5,000 of the 14,000 applicants have been shortlisted so far. They will be further assessed via interviews.

Professor Kong said that, besides academic results, SMU uses other criteria for admission. "Exam grades are a valid measure, but they

cannot be the sole measure of a student's ability."

The university is the first in Singapore to require all candidates to attend an interview. It started the practice 16 years ago, when 2,000 students applied to become part of its pioneer batch.

Interviews are still required now, although the number of candidates shortlisted for the six undergraduate degree courses has trebled.

They are conducted individually or in groups, with professors on the lookout for intellectual curiosity and leadership qualities.

SMU said a select group of students – about 1,000 – with strong academic and other abilities were invited to visit the university on "SMU Discovery Day" this year.

Prof Kong said: "Our engagement is directed at confirming that they are indeed an excellent match for the education that SMU offers, and for them to confirm that SMU is the university of choice for them."

A-level holder Benedict Lim, 20, who applied for the PLE course, said: "I have an interest in both (law and economics) and had a hard time picking one, so when I heard

about SMU's new course, I jumped at the chance."

He is keen on a broad-based education as he believes it will train him to be versatile and adaptable and enable him to switch careers.

"You know what they say about students having to take on jobs that don't exist today.

"I really do believe that. That's why it is best to have a broad-based education, so that you have a broad understanding of issues and how the world works."

sandra@sph.com.sg

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LAU FOOK KONG



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