

ST-SMU Future of Work

# Ensuring a higher degree of payoff

In the second of a four-part series on the future of work, Singapore Management University provost Lily Kong talks about how universities must transform to continue giving their graduates a competitive advantage

**Sandra Davie**  
Senior Education  
Correspondent

Just a few years after the Singapore Management University (SMU) was launched in 2000, there was much talk about the "SMU difference".

It started partly with the university's own tongue-in-cheek advertisements proclaiming that its students were, well, different.

But soon, employers receiving SMU students began noting that it was not just hype. The university's students were indeed more polished, outspoken and articulate than their peers from the other local institutions.

In recent weeks, the "SMU difference" has come up again, brought on by the latest graduate employment survey results.

The annual survey – based on graduates from the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and SMU – found that, despite the slowing economy, graduates from the three universities fared well.

Nearly nine in 10 had found jobs within six months of their final examinations and the mean gross monthly salary of those in full-time employment was \$3,515, up from \$3,468 for their 2015 counterparts.

But among the three universities, SMU students stood out, with 93.8 per cent of them getting a job within six months of their final exams. The rate was about 90 per cent for NUS and NTU graduates.

More than half of SMU graduates (51.3 per cent) in full-time jobs had received two or more job offers.

They also took home the highest pay. Their mean gross monthly salary of \$3,722 was higher than their peers at NUS (\$3,541) and NTU (\$3,424).

What accounts for the difference?

SMU provost Lily Kong says one key factor is linked to how well SMU students are prepared for working life from Day One.

The university, which has a city campus, is home to 10,000 students in six schools – from business to law and social sciences.

"From the first year, they are given help to uncover their strengths and talents and asked to think about the kind of careers that would suit them. They are then guided on picking the right courses that will help them access those careers," she adds.

Some 70 per cent of SMU students take up double majors or double degrees – more than double the rate in the bigger universities.

"We are able to do that partly because we have a smaller intake,"

she says, adding that it helps to be competent in more than one area.

"It opens up career options. You have the flexibility to traverse and integrate different disciplines."

The university took the bold step of setting aside marks for speaking up in class – up to 25 per cent of the grade.

"Singapore students in general are hesitant to speak up. SMU was starting from scratch and aimed to nurture a different kind of graduate – someone who is articulate and has good communication skills and who's not afraid to question norms," Prof Kong says.

"And then the faculty designed the admission, curriculum and teaching that will produce the type of graduates they wanted."

The university also introduced broader admission criteria, to select students based on aptitude and not just grades, as well as the American style of teaching in small seminar groups.

The other five universities recently announced a slew of work-study programmes but Prof Kong notes that SMU made internships a requirement for its students from the word "go", in 2000.

"Minister Ong Ye Kung spoke in Parliament on the value of learning by doing."

"SMU has always recognised the benefits of experiential learning and emphasised it in many ways, including through student internships."

While they need to do just one internship, 70 per cent of SMU students have done two or more, she observes.

Some even extend their study period to fit in more work stints.

"It shows that they see the value of internship and make the most of it – to expose themselves to different industries and different kinds of work."

A quarter of the university students end up working for the companies they interned with.

For example, Mr Brandon Ong, 27, a business graduate, took on four internships – at a cocoa trading company, an energy research consultancy, an energy company and investment bank Deutsche. He eventually accepted a job offer as an analyst at Deutsche.

So far, so good. What about in the future? Will SMU still be able to give its students an edge in an economy faced with disruptions?

Prof Kong agrees that, given the pace of change, no university can afford to rest on its past accomplishments.

Futurists say that, by 2025, one in two jobs today will no longer exist, and up to a quarter of



Graduates must know how to learn on the go, and higher education must go beyond the three or four years that students spend in university before they enter the workforce, says Prof Lily Kong.  
ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

In partnership with



jobs will have been replaced by smart software or robots.

Prof Kong agrees that students must learn how to thrive in a gig economy, where work will be project-based and where there will be periods of "feast and famine".

She also notes that, with the Internet, companies assemble teams across borders to work on projects, so it is crucial for graduates to learn to work in groups.

She stresses the need to bring the real world into the classroom.

SMU is doing just that, with SMU-X courses launched two years ago. These were a hit with students and expanded last year to admit up to 2,000 students a year.

This means that every SMU undergraduate will be able to take at least one SMU-X course in his four years of study.

Some 200 companies have come in as industry partners, with lessons centred on solving real-world problems.

A public policy management course, for instance, is taught by getting students to work with a welfare organisation to draw up programmes for disadvantaged families. Professors guide students through their projects and students are graded on their participation and the final outcome of the project.

Prof Kong says SMU-X is designed to mimic the workplace and nurture in students various skills, including how to work in teams. "Students who form the SMU-X project teams are drawn from different courses. They learn to work with people from different backgrounds, who might have

## BIO

Professor Lily Kong joined Singapore Management University (SMU) as its provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences in September 2015.

As provost, she is the chief academic officer of the university, and has the responsibility of leading the development of its strategy and implementing policies relating to its academic activities.

A graduate of the National University of Singapore (NUS) and University College London, Prof Kong was a faculty member at the NUS Department of Geography from 1991 to 2015. She held several senior administrative positions during her tenure at NUS, including vice-provost (academic personnel), from 2012 to 2015, and vice-provost (education), from 2004 to 2007.

Prof Kong is widely known for her research on religion, cultural

policy and the creative economy, urban heritage and conservation, and national identity. She sits on the editorial boards of a dozen international journals in her field, and is frequently invited to serve as a keynote speaker at conferences in her domain.

An award-winning researcher and teacher, Prof Kong has received five international fellowship awards, including the Commonwealth Fellowship Award and the Fulbright Fellowship Award.

She has also won the Robert Stoddard Award for Distinguished Service (Geography of Religion and Belief Systems), given out by the Association of American Geographers.

Prof Kong was conferred the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2006.

She attended CHIJ (Victoria Street) and National Junior College.

different viewpoints, and learn how to combine people's strengths."

Graduates must know how to learn on the go, as their roles change or they switch careers.

Higher education cannot be front-loaded into three or four years before students go out to work.

"Once they complete university, they must be prepared to come back every few years to update their knowledge and skills," says Prof Kong, adding that SMU is already working on making more of its courses available to alumni through SMU Academy.

The university has also started assessing some students on their competencies. "So, with every course a student takes, we will

record the competencies he has acquired. He or she will have a 'competency heat map' showing which are the areas that they acquired good skills and which are the areas where they are lacking.

"We will identify courses that they can take up while working to plug those gaps."

She says the university has to keep experimenting and evolving, to keep the SMU difference.

Prof Kong returns to Minister Ong's recent speech in Parliament and agrees that Singapore is "at the threshold of major changes".

It is not just SMU. All universities also need to respond to these changes to continue giving their graduates the edge.

sandra@sph.com.sg

# Future Now

99%  
OF  
SMU GRADUATES

endorsed their educational experience as being **impactful** through complete **transformation** or personal growth

\* Joint Graduate Employment Survey 2016

The future of work will be drastically different. This is why we constantly rethink our curriculum at SMU. Our experiential learning through SMU-X courses, interdisciplinary Politics, Law and Economics major and innovative Smart-City Management & Technology major are unconventional initiatives poised to transform the future.

Our students curate their own learning journeys with flexibility, and the impact is telling: more than 4 in 5 SMU graduates affirmed being well-equipped in independent thinking, adept in communication and presentation, teamwork and networking, and are globally-savvy to work across cultures. SMU's community service also imbues in graduates a heart of empathy and social responsibility. They are problem-solvers who are intellectually agile and adaptable. In short, we educate the future graduate today for the jobs and workplaces of tomorrow.

In a disruptive world, make a prescient choice to study at a university that embraces the future with ideas, confidence and courage.

ADMISSIONS CLOSE 19 MARCH 2017. APPLY NOW AT [smu.sg/apply-a](http://smu.sg/apply-a)

