

HIGHER EDUCATION

The social sciences edge in business

Studying society and human behaviour is essential if businesses want to innovate

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SINGAPORE – Understanding customer behaviour through the social sciences — or the study of society and human behaviour — could give businessmen an edge in an increasingly interconnected world of commerce, according to Singapore Management University School of Social Sciences dean James Tang.

“As people are now being connected socially on the Internet or virtual world, social science training is therefore a good fit, whereby an understanding of social and psychological behaviour has risen in importance,” said Professor Tang, as he shared

that SMU — which has established itself with a business slant — is looking to start a post-graduate programme in social sciences for senior executives.

Citing the example of Kodak — which went bust after it failed to respond to changing consumer needs — Prof Tang told TODAY in an interview: “In order to innovate, understanding of human behaviour is essential”.

He also noted that societies are evolving and problems are no longer confined to a single discipline but cut across various schools of thought.

For example, a fund manager would have to consider the political environment of a particular country and not just the risks of financial products, said Prof Tang, who took the helm last year after more than a decade at the University of Hong Kong.

SMU’s new social sciences post-graduate programme on the cards



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“In order to innovate, understanding of human behaviour is essential.”

Prof James Tang
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would combine both research and multi-disciplinary elements, he said. Noting the busy schedules of the typical office worker, Prof Tang reiterated that the programme has to be tailored to their needs in terms of flexibility.

Mooting some areas of focus that will be suitable for senior executives, Prof Tang cited the topic of sustainability that combines sociology and environmental theories. Another possibility is the field of managing economic uncertainties, which involves psychology and economics.

Last week, the International Academic Advisory Panel — chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam — recommended that Singapore strengthens research in social science and humanities.

Mr Tharman had also pointed out that there was “a lot of untapped potential in social science research in Singapore, with lessons that can be

derived for public policy in Singapore and elsewhere”.

Prof Tang said that social sciences would be useful in addressing future issues in Singapore such as ageing — including the fact that the private sector would have to respond with new products for different consumption patterns.

The Government will also need to adapt policies as an ageing population here undergoes sociological, psychological and behavioural changes.

Compared to the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University, SMU’s social sciences undergraduate programme is the new kid on the block.

But Prof Tang reiterated that SMU’s School of Social Sciences “has established its niche in the higher education landscape” by developing social sciences that is multi-disciplinary in nature.