

HOW THE UNIVERSITY CAN SET ITSELF APART

# SMU can be different again

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When Singapore Management University (SMU) was first set up in 2000, it was proud to be different.

Its advertisements showing students standing upside down on their hands were refreshing and much talked about. SMU said the difference was “confident students who speak out and participate actively in class, faculty who serve as mentors and role models, and a holistic approach”. And in the Stakeholders Report in 2002, SMU chairman Ho Kwon Ping pro-

claimed: “This university is unique. The faculty and staff know and feel the spirit, the students radiate it.”

Rather than admitting students based just on grades, SMU interviewed every one individually to find the right mix. The curriculum, based on an American education, had students taking a broad range of courses before specialising in one discipline.

According to student blogs a decade ago, SMU’s small seminars meant “you can raise a mini debate with the professor without feeling so embarrassed”. When SMU students went for interviews, employers and other applicants alike said they stood out because they seemed more confident and ambitious.

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More than a decade later, SMU seems to have become more similar to the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Much of what made SMU stand out in the past has become commonplace or even disappeared.

Today, SMU carries out most interviews in groups rather than interviewing students individually. While students still speak out in class, classmates say they often do so to score points for participation rather than out of intellectual curiosity.

Comments from faculty, the content of job postings and even SMU’s mission statement all seem to emphasise research rather than teaching. While this focus could be due to the competition among universities to boost their rankings by bolstering their research output, it seems to have come at the expense of teaching and mentoring. SMU President Arnoud DeMeyer reiterated in comments during the recent commencement that “undertaking research” remains a key focus.

The curricula at other universities are now more similar to SMU’s, especially with NTU having revamped its curriculum in 2011 to allow students to take more courses outside their major. So SMU’s recent shift to have students take courses in more disciplines seems like a tweak to keep up with competitors rather than something original.

SMU’s proposal to set up SMU Village — a short-stay residential college for students to incubate their project ideas — also sounds like just a slightly different take on the already-established NUS University Town. And it is NUS that took the lead online by being the first to offer massive open online courses (MOOCs), on Coursera.

The similarities have not gone unnoticed. As one SMU graduate blogged recently, “the school culture is actually no different from NUS and NTU”.

## MAKING IT UNIQUE AGAIN

All these changes are not to say that education standards at SMU, NUS or NTU have dropped. Indeed, NUS and NTU have done better in world rankings in recent years, while SMU graduates continue to command higher salaries than their peers from other universities.

To better prepare students for an in-

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creasingly competitive global economy, schools must help students learn a different way of thinking through innovative new programmes and have faculty members to mentor creative learners.

By focussing on teaching and encouraging faculty to act as mentors, SMU could help students succeed in a more connected world. Developing a scheme similar to Harvard University’s Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching “to catalyse innovation and excellence in learning and teaching” could bring back the emphasis on teaching that would benefit students tremendously.

Setting up new cutting-edge programmes could also increase differentiation. Stanford University’s Institute of Design, for instance, integrates business and management training into more traditional engineering and product design education.

Closer to home, NTU has launched the Earth Observatory, which conducts research on earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and climate change in South-east Asia and elsewhere. SMU could similarly look at taking a distinctive approach in different fields rather than by following other schools in adding law and social sciences.

SMU might even take a cue from NTU, where Provost Professor Freddy Boey said the school thinks ahead of the curve and projects “where the demand will be five to 10 years down the road”, as it develops its own vision of the future and determines which programmes to implement to regain the differentiation it enjoyed in the past.

The university landscape now is more competitive than ever, with new universities such as Singapore University of Technology and Design, SIM University and the latest, Singapore Institute of Technology.

There is great value in SMU returning to its previous uniqueness. This will require the same boldness and innovation we saw in SMU when it was first launched.