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THE SMU STORY

While SMU is an institution for management education, it is also looking to become a platform to encourage dialogue with Indian companies. Its Provost and Deputy President, Professor R Srivastava talks about the growth of this dynamic young university.

By **SHOBHA TSERING BHALLA**

For a man whose early academic performance was anything but an Indian parent's dream come true, Professor Rajendra Srivastava seems like a teacher right out of "Dead Poets' Society" – that Oscar winning film on an inspiring teacher who made a life-changing impact on his students.

The burly and articulate Lucknow-born Provost and Deputy President of Singapore Management University (SMU), who is in his early 60s, has all the makings of an academic whose classroom was as much the storied halls of top colleges in India and the United States as the gritty streets of real life.

"The principal told my parents that I was being promoted to the next class only because of my older siblings," he recalls with wry amusement, adding that it was only when he appeared for the entrance exam to the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur that his academic life took a dramatic upturn as here the system was one that allowed his analytical ability to flourish. He finished with distinction close to the top of his graduating class and from there on to leading American colleges was par for the course.

If IIT Kanpur was the crucible where his future career as a technocrat was forged it was the United States where his survival and entrepreneurial skills were honed. Eager to live like a typical American under-graduate instead of a typical thrifty and prudent Indian student of the 1970s, he took on three part-time jobs to earn enough to buy a car while doing his Master in Industrial Engineering at the University of Rhode Island. That was the start to a post-graduate life that saw him gaining wide exposure to America while earning a pretty dollar. It says something about Professor Srivastava's risk-taking, out-of-the-box attitude to life which, no doubt, enhances his experience as a policy-maker for his university, that his choice of Rhode Island was not for the academic weight its name carried but because of its beaches, as he puts it.

Professor Srivastava went on to do his PhD at the University of Pittsburgh where he specialized in Systems Engineering and later shifted to Marketing and Finance



"as the financial impact on marketing drew my interest." He started his teaching career at the University of Texas, Austin, leaving only after 25 years when he was Senior Chair Professor to take up the position of Goizueta Chair Professor of Marketing at the Goizueta Business School in Emory

University.

The cricket-loving academic who was appointed as Provost and Deputy President (Academic Affairs) of SMU in 2008, envisages SMU becoming a regionally hailed institution that specializes not only in imparting knowledge to its students but as a facilitator and provider of solutions to real world challenges.

Since his appointment he has contributed to putting SMU on the global education map for its core competencies in financial strength, management of innovation and utilisation of fact driven information (Business Analytics). Under his guidance, SMU has come a long way since its inception in 2000. In terms of growth and quality, it ranks only behind much older universities such as Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) in the management disciplines. In management research, SMU is ranked 54 against HKUST which is ranked at 16 and NUS at 43.

Here are some excerpts from a wide-ranging interview that India Se had with him recently:

India Se: What are SMU's philosophy and strengths?

Rajendra Srivastava: SMU has built itself up to be a very efficient university. For instance, our target is to reduce operating costs by three per cent every year. Just to give you an idea, SMU started 13 years ago with 12 faculty and 300 students. It now has 8,500 students and 330 faculty members. We have made a difference through our undergraduate programme. SMU's focus is to inculcate thinking and character not specific to particular subjects. For instance, ethics is an area that is compulsory for all students. Our strength is in building a common character among the students. A lot of weightage is given to community learning and service done by SMU students. Currently, we are sending our 84 per cent of our students on exchange programmes. The goal is to reach 100 per cent. The T-shape learning model followed by universities is well known to signify the breadth and depth of courses required to major in a particular area. In SMU, since we offer double majors or double degree our model is more of a pi shape model. Seventy-five per cent of our students have either double majors or double degrees. For every major, an internship is required. We put a lot of emphasis on out-of-class learning. This type of exposure helps in building team management and leadership skills.

India Se: What are SMU's key areas of excellence? Why were they chosen?

Rajendra Srivastava: SMU's excellence lies in helping an area grow. It has contributed to key areas such as real estate, healthcare, medical technology and finance. We ensure that our programmes are aligned for this. For instance, we offer a Master in Wealth Management. This has been ranked number two in the Financial Times. We have also signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Singapore Exchange that is related to high frequency trading. I would like to emphasise that SMU is not just a teaching university. To build a global reputation, a lot of importance has been given

to thought leadership research. SMU set its research partly through its post-graduate programmes.

India Se: What is SMU's international strategy, especially regarding India? And what is your tie-up with Wharton?

Rajendra Srivastava: Currently, we are not planning to expand our undergraduate course overseas. As we are a young organization, we do not have a heavy endowment. When we started, we received governance advice from Wharton. We are looking at doing something similar for other universities. As of now, our expansion is most likely to be in non-degree education. However, when we find potential partners, we will definitely consider offering our high quality programmes. We are already in talks with some universities. For example, we are seriously considering partnering with Singapore University of Technology and Design for technology related programmes (Master of Innovation and Master of Management) and similarly with IIT Kanpur.

In terms of our strategy for India, SMU is trying to learn and differentiate itself from organisations such as the Singapore-Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry and think-tanks like the Institute of South Asian Studies which are also focusing on India. We do not want to duplicate those efforts.

We are studying how we can bring SMU and Singapore to the table to create an impact in India. Currently, many Indian companies are facing challenges due to lack of capital. We are planning on holding a session with the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) Institute on what can be done for Small Medium Enterprises in India. Though SMU's forte is management education, the objective is to use SMU as a platform to encourage dialogue with Indian companies. We are also working closely with the Confederation of Indian Industries on several initiatives. --- Additional reporting by *Sanyukta Raman*. ■

