

SMU reinvents tertiary learning and teaching for the Asian century

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Arnoud De Meyer, president Photo: Singapore Management University, reproduced with permission

Managing organisations in a rapidly changing world requires an agile mindset that recognises and takes advantage of opportunities that arise with every transformation.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) has risen to the challenge with innovative teaching that develops creative and entrepreneurial leaders for the emerging Asian century.

"We are a 21st century institution," says Professor Arnoud De Meyer, president of SMU. "We started with a very innovative concept of teaching - research-oriented, interdisciplinary and collaborative. We're constantly reinventing the model to remain relevant in a knowledge-based economy."

Highly regarded for excellence in management practice, SMU is the youngest university to be dually accredited with the European Quality Improvement System and Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Founded in 2000, the university has evolved from its business management roots to offer a well-rounded education through six schools. It emphasises a holistic approach to undergraduate education and lifelong learning with postgraduate and executive development programmes.

Learning at SMU is highly interactive in classes that have on average 45 students immersed in group work, analyses and presentations.



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In the undergraduate programme, many of the students do two to three internships each lasting at least 10 weeks. All of them are required to perform 80 hours of community service to instil an understanding of their responsibility as future leaders.

The students have vast opportunities to gain international exposure through exchange programmes within SMU's growing network of partner universities. SMU's campus is also a state-of-the-art facility centrally located in the city.

"We bring quite a lot of speakers from industry into the classroom," De Meyer says. "We have an advantage of having such a central city location so it's easy to bring them in to share their experience and interact with the students."

Future-ready

Such interaction offers real-world insights and a particularly Asian perspective that prepare students for their future roles in business, economics, accountancy, information systems, law and the social sciences. The university's emphasis on interdisciplinary learning enhances students' prospects by offering the opportunity to complete a second major within four years. In fact, 69 per cent of SMU's undergraduates complete their bachelors with either a second major or a double degree.

SMU's Lee Kong Chian School of Business offers an extensive range of business management specialisations and accepts some 750 students per year. It is the largest business school in Singapore and a top business school in the region, with growing international recognition. According to the research ranking of economics schools compiled by the Netherlands' Tilburg University, SMU's School of Economics ranks second in Asia and is consistently ranked among the top 10 worldwide in the field of econometrics.

SMU's work on analytics for business, consumer and social insight has attracted worldwide attention. A major part of this effort is the Living Analytics Research Centre (LARC), a five-year collaboration with Carnegie Mellon University, funded by Singapore's National Research Foundation. LARC has continuing projects using data from social media and Twitter, large-scale consumer service providers, tourism and leisure operators and the LiveLabs Urban Lifestyle test-bed involving data from mobile users in various leisure and lifestyle settings. Together, LARC and LiveLabs are pioneering an approach to social and consumer analytics that is experiment-driven, iterative and network-centric. LARC and LiveLabs are also active in addressing data security and privacy issues that are critical aspects of preserving public trust. This work is spearheaded by SMU's School of Information Systems, and involves faculty from business, social sciences, economics and law.

Specialising in commercial law and intellectual property protection, SMU's School of Law became the first in Asia to join the prestigious THEMIS network in March. The THEMIS programme allows law students at partner universities to strengthen their academic and cultural knowledge in an international context. With SMU joining the THEMIS network, its law students can participate in international exchange programmes at top-ranked European universities. This deepens their understanding of international law practice, giving them a competitive edge in their chosen field.



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The scope of opportunity in the accounting field similarly attracts some of the best talents to SMU's School of Accountancy, which assures them a good start in many global companies regionally headquartered in Singapore and throughout Asia.

With new course offerings, SMU keeps its School of Social Sciences attuned to the Asian context. The school opened three double-major courses last year. International and Asian studies delve into the global role of Asia. Arts and culture management equips students for this fast-rising sector in Singapore. Meanwhile, the public policy and public management course is a first in Singapore.

Over the past decade, SMU has been first-to-market in Asia with professionally oriented master's programmes in emerging relevant areas. For example, SMU was the first in Asia to offer master's degrees in wealth management, financial services technology and operations, business analytics applications, innovation, communication management, CFO leadership and in tri-sector collaboration. Its juris doctorate programme is the only one in Singapore, and the master in professional accounting programme was also the country's first. Other newly-launched professionally oriented programmes are master's degrees in quantitative finance and in financial economics and a practice-oriented PhD in general management.

"Management is about action so we educate our students to be proactive leaders in their chosen profession," De Meyer says. Through its executive development programme, SMU provides customised training for working professionals. For instance, the diploma programme on health management allows employees of SingHealth group, the largest in Singapore's health care sector, to earn the certificate through sessions spread out over a year.

For key clients such as Unilever, International SOS, Singapore Airlines, Infineon and MSIG, SMU offers courses ranging from business training for medical directors to leadership and business development training for executives.

The university's executive MBA programme attracts C-suite executives, who account for 68 per cent of the student class.

Asian hub with global impact

As Singapore's first autonomous government-funded university, SMU aims to be an Asian knowledge hub for business and management with a global impact.

Through more than 20 research institutes and centres of excellence, university faculty collaborates with industry partners, government agencies and research institutes overseas to advance multidisciplinary solutions that help address issues faced in Asia. The university has identified three areas of excellence in research: financial markets and institutions, analytics for business, consumer and social insight, and innovation and entrepreneurship.

"We are very much in tune with industry," De Meyer says. "There is an advisory board for each of the schools and most of the big research centres. We bring people from the government and industry into these advisory boards to talk about how they see the professions evolving and how we as a university have to adjust to that."



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The university aims to make a global impact in financial economics. Particularly, it seeks to advise central banks with early detection systems for economic risks such as asset price bubbles and high inflation.

Research done by the Sim Kee Boon Institute for Financial Economics has already contributed two indices in Singapore. One is the inflation expectations index created in collaboration with MasterCard Worldwide. The other is the corporate governance index for the Securities Investors Association (Singapore).

Asian century thought leader

Recognising China's pivotal role in the region, SMU is stepping up collaboration initiatives there. De Meyer signed 13 agreements in April this year for exchange programmes with Fudan University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics and the Sichuan University. SMU is also establishing a joint research centre on development studies with Fudan University.

These complement long-standing exchange programmes with more than 200 academic partners including the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, Carnegie Mellon University and University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

Within Asia, SMU's partnerships extend to top universities in Hong Kong and South Korea, where student exchanges have been active since 2008.

"As economic activities shift towards Asia, we enable our students to interact more with their young Asian counterparts and learn from each other," De Meyer says.

Likewise, by expanding multidisciplinary collaborations within the region, SMU aims to contribute seminal work in the social sciences. It has begun research on how rural development on the mainland is evolving and the role of families in Southeast Asian societies.

The university is inviting social scientists and top-quality students throughout the region to enrich research on problems related to income disparity, environmental and sustainability issues and solutions for an ageing population.

"Most of the time, we have very little home-grown concrete insights about society and business in Asia, and fall back on publications or ideas that come out of the United States or Europe," De Meyer says. "SMU is a great platform to understand what the issues are for Asia and how we can solve them together based on evidence and good research. In addition, with SMU's expertise in case writing on leading Asian businesses, our international faculty and students contribute to the development of globally relevant new knowledge."

Such pioneering work helps governments validate economic policies and leads the private sector to new business opportunities within the region. By bringing an authentic Asian perspective to the fore, SMU is making its mark as a leading knowledge centre and thought leader for the Asian century.