

Making the effort to go beyond grades

THE decision by the Singapore Management University (SMU) to interview more than 7,000 candidates vying for admission this year is an example of an educational institution that walks the talk on intellectual diversity.

The first in Singapore to require all candidates to go through an interview, the university initiated the practice 13 years ago when only 2,000 students applied to join its pioneer cohort. Admirably, it has stuck to this demanding and time-consuming process in spite of the number of shortlisted candidates having more than trebled this year.

The belief that examination grades cannot be the sole indicator of a student's ability and potential is now es-

poused by many, but SMU's dedication in putting that principle into practice sets it apart. The selection process at the young university has contributed to its reputation for producing graduates who question intellectual orthodoxy with the same vigour evident in the culture of the university. While the alleged paucity of such young Singaporean thinkers – or their provenance in foreign universities – was always a myth, SMU has shown how a new generation of such graduates can be nurtured locally.

SMU's emphasis on assessing applicants holistically is in keeping with the way in which leading universities select their students. At Oxford, for example,

interviews are not designed to elicit "right" answers or a show of specialist knowledge, but to push students to think and to see how they respond to new ideas. Cambridge interviews, too, emphasise openness to new ideas along with a passion for the chosen subject and the ability to think independently. Harvard College interviews seek to flesh out the written application with other information that would present a fuller picture of a candidate's merits and potential. The admissions process at Yale identifies many little things which, when added up, tip the scale in favour of those who are selected. These systems distinguish within the ranks of the academically gifted to select those

who can make the most of opportunities offered.

SMU's approach is faithful to the purpose of such international benchmarks. It should, however, also guard against the objectives of the interview process being subverted. It is generally the case that those from privileged social and academic backgrounds are more likely to display self-confidence in thinking and speaking, developed through close interaction with their well-heeled parents and peers, than those from more humble backgrounds. Interviewers must be prepared to factor in such disparities to give a chance to able young people to make progress despite the odds.