

Values 'should be taught, not left to be caught'



SMU student leaders (from left): Ms Cherie Neo, president of the students' association; Mr Tam Zhi Yang, president of the school's law society; and Mr Lim Wei Yuan, who leads the school's student ambassadors.
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SMU drawing up plan to put 'structure' in teaching students soft skills

By AMELIA TENG

PRIMARY and secondary school students have lessons on character and citizenship in school. Now university students will also be getting similar lessons.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) is in the midst of drawing up its own values-based programme, known as SMU LifeLessons.

The initiative, announced in May, will cut across student activities like co-curricular activity training and events, camps, community work and overseas exchanges.

Speaking to The Straits Times recently, Dr Bervyn Lee, director of SMU's office of student life, said the programme hopes to put some "structure" in the imparting of values and soft skills, such as communication, to students.

Time will be set aside for them to think about their goals and what is important. Facilitators - who will be drawn from a pool of staff, alumni, senior students and coaches - will also be attached to student groups.

Those taking part in a swimming competition, for instance, will get "time-out" moments to re-think what the sport means to them.

Instead of just barking orders to train harder or break records, their coach would also prompt them to share their thoughts during regular sessions.

Dr Lee is leading a team of 30 staff to plan the initiative, which will include distributing journals for reflection to first-year students next year.

For a start, to find out more about the students, the staff have been joining them at their activities such as dance and choir training and competitions, even accompanying some overseas for events this year.

The staff spoke to around 100 undergraduates, whose responses were mostly positive, although some were indifferent, said Dr Lee.

"Academic qualification does not necessarily equate to education", and values "should be taught and not left to be caught", he said.

But it will not be easy, he added, as most young people would have "entrenched most of their values". Their primary focus is also on academics, and time for anything else is limited, he explained.

Third-year business student Lim Wei Yuan spent about an hour sharing his thoughts with a facilitator during a Hong Kong trip for an education trade fair in March.

The 23-year-old, who was there representing SMU, leads the school's team of some 40 student ambassadors.

It is good to start thinking about motivations and purpose, because "as a generation we don't spend enough time introspecting", he said.

"But it will not be an easy process, and students must see the value in it."

Coursemate Cherie Neo, who is president of SMU's students' association, agreed.

"Students complain about the school's compulsory 80-hour community service requirement," said the 21-year-old, hoping that the value lessons will help them see the reasons behind the service.

From 2000, when SMU was first established, to last year, its students have completed more than 1.5 million hours of community service.

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