



Singapore Management University (SMU) president Lily Kong is the first Singaporean woman to lead a local university. The noted geographer says that instead of slowing things down, the pandemic has given SMU a sense of urgency and reassurance that the areas of focus it has picked – digital transformation, sustainable living and growth in Asia – are “absolutely relevant”. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

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Prepping student-managers for a post-Covid-19 Asia

Pandemic has helped affirm that SMU's areas of focus are correct priorities, says its president



Ravi Velloor

Associate Editor

As the pandemic rolls on unabated, one group that's most affected worldwide are students, especially those in tertiary education for whom book work and lectures are only part of the learning. So much of the rest of their education depends on group discussions, onsite work experience and other activities that need them to work closely with others, a potential health hazard now.

If you were Singapore Management University, the last bits are particularly important. Covid-19 has upended so much.

Yet, a conversation with SMU president Lily Kong – the first Singaporean woman to lead a local university – reveals anything but a defeatist attitude. In fact, she says, Covid-19 has helped affirm that the three areas of focus that SMU had set itself – digital transformation, sustainable living and growth in Asia – were indeed the right priorities.

“People say to me, all this must have been slowed down, but the reverse has happened,” says

Professor Kong. “It has given us a sense of urgency and reassurance that the areas we had picked were absolutely relevant.”

Twenty years into its existence – the last two of which she has led it as president – SMU, located in the Bras Basah area, has developed something of a unique character.

Where older grooves of academe brood on in the leafy ambience of Kent Ridge and Jurong, SMU sits in the heart of the city, close to the institutions that its alumni, or “products”, will head to with their new degrees.

These include banks like DBS Group, the courts and law firms such as Dentons Rodyk, consumer goods giants like Unilever, and government agencies and statutory boards such as the Economic Development Board.

For all the stresses that Covid-19 has placed on businesses, including jobs and fresh hiring, SMU's placement tracking suggests that eight out of 10 of the most recent cohort found employment this year against more than 90 per cent of the outflow when measured in November, typically.

Young lawyers are getting their training contracts as before and those emerging from the information systems and digital transformation streams are particularly in demand.

It is a huge relief for university administrators because it affirms that they are sending into jobs young women and men fit for purpose. Ultimately, this will feed back into student interest in joining the university.

The placement figures will likely improve by the year end, says Prof Kong, since the 80 per cent figure relates to data up to July.

“I told Minister Ong Ye Kung just after he moved from education to transport that I had good news – things are much better than what we had hoped for.”

Interestingly, SMU has had a bumper harvest of freshers this year, admitting no fewer than 2,400 students. That compares with an incoming cohort of about 2,100 in the two years prior, and even fewer in the years before.

“Lots of students are staying back in Singapore this year,” says Prof Kong. “We would like to expand enrolments, but the birth cohort being what it is in Singapore, the undergraduate intake will start to come down. While the larger directions are set by the Ministry of Education, we are of the view that we should not go back to 1,700 because there is such a thing as critical mass which makes for a community of students who can mix with students from other disciplinary backgrounds.”

International students, for instance, are limited to 10 per cent of the intake. Given the interest in the university from around the region, SMU believes it can accept dozens more full-paying foreign students without sacrificing places for locals.

What makes a typical SMU student? Prof Kong says her students are distinguishable by their articulateness, self-confidence in offering a view, and work-readiness. She attributes this largely to the interactive learning pedagogy as well as strong industry engagement and experience.

Internships are a graduation requirement and a typical student does 2.6 internships, whether at companies, government departments or even non-governmental organisations.

Good as SMU students doubtless are, there is, of course, the perception that Singaporeans tend to be too formulaic and process

driven in their approach, limiting their ability to think out of the box. I ask if SMU had an antidote.

“It is work in progress. If we did (have a solution), we would franchise it,” says Prof Kong. “What we do try – and I do it in my research as well – is to expose myself to areas that are not in my immediate focus. It is always the tangential things I am doing that give me perspective on a topic. My dean takes this view to our curriculum that if you are too focused on something, it means you are unfocused on other things. “From the start, we had a

curriculum that exposes students to other fields. For instance, the fact that SMU students have to work on sustainability and climate change could ultimately push you towards a career in green finance.”

What about the vast changes sweeping the technological and industrial landscape, such as automation, robotics, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things? All this when society's preferences are itself changing in myriad ways?

Prof Kong says SMU views management with a far more expansive lens than business

Fast facts

THE PRESIDENT

Professor Lily Kong is president of the Singapore Management University (SMU). She is the first Singaporean woman to head a university on the island. She also has been a Member of the Public Service Commission since 2009.

She was previously provost of SMU; vice-provost and vice-president at the National University of Singapore and executive vice-president (academic) of Yale-NUS College. She is 55 years old.

Prof Kong is a geographer. She is internationally known for her research on social and cultural change in Asian cities, and has published extensively on Singapore's urban transformation.

Schooled at CHIJ, she has Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees from NUS and a PhD from University College London. She was awarded the Public Service Star this year and the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2006.

She is a Commonwealth Fellow as well as a Fulbright Fellow. She has also won the Robert

Stoddard Award from the Association of American Geographers for contributions to the study of religion.

Her hobbies are music, gardening and baking. Her works include a book on hawkers, Singapore Hawker Centres: People, Places, Food.

THE UNIVERSITY

Established in 2000, SMU's stated mission is to generate research with global impact and produce creative and entrepreneurial leaders for the knowledge-based economy.

Located in the Bras Basah area, SMU's six schools comprise accountancy, business, economics, information systems, law and social sciences.

It has a faculty strength of over 370, and has produced more than 22,800 alumni.

Since taking charge, Prof Kong has identified three priority areas of a strategic plan to realise SMU Vision 2025: digital transformation, sustainable living and growth in Asia.

management. Both she and predecessor-president Arnoud de Meyer are convinced that management involves also how society and the environment are best organised and dealt with. This lends a practical edge to what is taught at SMU.

As for specific areas, discussions are ongoing on setting up centres for machine learning and econometrics, artificial intelligence and law. SMU's Centre for Computational Law is writing code and looking at how to develop tools for the lawyer of the future.

At the other end, the university is analysing what new issues lawyers will confront and how governance and regulatory frameworks can be set to deal with these new issues.

In August, it introduced a degree in computing and law, the first of its kind in Singapore. Meanwhile, its Retail Centre for Excellence is looking at how data analytics can deepen understanding of changes in that industry. Then, there is logistics and operations management, another area seeing swift change.

“We are looking for partners and for grants that would support research in this direction,” she says, noting that Carnegie Mellon University has been a good university partner for some years and SMU has just furthered a relationship with Imperial College London in green finance.

In Singapore, SMU partners Fujitsu and the National Research Foundation in Unicen, a lab that works on research and development combining computing, behavioural economics and management science approaches to create intelligent systems that address local urban challenges.

I cannot help wondering what she, a noted geographer, is doing running a “management” university.

It is not an unfamiliar question and Prof Kong's first response is that there is nothing that stops someone from outside Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) leading a university. Besides, she says, SMU takes a broad view of “management”.

“The ability to think broadly is not the purview of any one discipline,” she says. “As a geographer, I have particular skills that geography has developed in me that make for a very good manager and leader. You will see geographers leading many universities because the nature of the discipline is a synthesising one.”

Prof Kong's move from NUS to SMU, first as provost, then the elevation to president, in some ways marks a return to familiar surroundings. In fact, her large office in the SMU building looks out on the classroom in her former school, CHIJ.

Not born into privilege – her mother worked in a variety of jobs, including as babysitter to put her three girls and a son through school – Prof Kong says she has more than one North Star in life. Her mother, who was diagnosed with cancer when Prof Kong was 18, was, of course, the first. But there were others too, including a relief teacher at CHIJ who got her husband to stand as guarantor for her university scholarship although she had known Prof Kong for just three months.

Experiences such as these no doubt shape her view of the world, what universities should represent and what their products ought to be like. Columbia University, next to Harlem, is not known to work too closely with the local community, she notes. On the other hand, New York University, sited in Greenwich Village, is not only mindful of the city it is in but also reaches out to other city locations in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi. SMU would have earned its place if one day its lease on the current locations run out and the local people, companies and government offices in the neighbourhood rise up to demand the university stays where it is.

Prof Kong has been a member of the Public Service Commission for more than a decade. I ask about the quality of candidates she sees as part of her work there and what she seeks in them.

“The willingness to give a significant number of their years with the right heart,” she responds.

velloor@sph.com.sg