

Making the most of one's university experience in a pandemic



To succeed in an economy reshaped by the current pandemic, students must be adaptable, able to apply knowledge and draw insights from various disciplines, says Singapore Management University provost Timothy Clark. ST FILE PHOTO

Hybrid and online lessons, global exposure via virtual exchanges among ways to adapt

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Reimagining Universities, Post-Covid

In the second of a four-part series on reimagining universities post-Covid-19, education correspondent Amelia Teng speaks to Singapore Management University provost Timothy Clark about how the higher education landscape is changing.

When Covid-19 hit Singapore last year, universities had to put in place measures, from temperature-taking to restricting face-to-face classes and moving lessons online, to keep the virus at bay.

The institutions have been successful, with no transmission clusters to date.

Singapore Management University (SMU) provost Timothy Clark said that the local universities' top priorities were keeping students safe and ensuring that they were able to progress in their studies despite the disruptions.

"We wanted to ensure that students who are graduating could graduate and students in their first, second, third years could progress in subsequent years," he said.

"So it was really important to us to ensure that we delivered the teaching but also were able to continue with the robust systems of assessment and examination."

But life on campus has not returned entirely to normal, with overseas exchanges and internships still on hold.

At SMU, which has since the beginning of this year restarted lessons on campus for most undergraduates, officials are pondering how to help students make the best of their university education and prepare them for work amid a global pandemic.

Q Covid-19 accelerated the need for education to be delivered beyond the physical campus. How did SMU adapt to this new normal?

A SMU adapted in the following ways: holding classes and exams online, conducting hybrid courses and organising events like graduation and career fairs virtually.

For many years SMU has required instructors to undertake training and rehearse the possibility of eventually moving instruction online in response to extreme events. It meant that SMU was able to act swiftly to move courses online when the pandemic emerged.

Within 10 days of the Dorscon Orange announcement (that the outbreak was becoming more serious) on Feb 7 last year, we moved close to 50 per cent of our undergraduate offerings online. In fact, all classes with enrolment of 50 or more students moved to an online format, with effect from Feb 10.

As the situation further escalated, all instruction was moved online for the last two weeks of the term (starting March 30), before the Singapore Government announced the national circuit breaker plans.

To help students better prepare

About SMU provost Timothy Clark

Professor Timothy Clark has been provost of the Singapore Management University (SMU) since April 2019.

During his time at SMU, Prof Clark, 56, has undertaken a range of initiatives aimed at enhancing the distinctive DNA of SMU's education and the impact of its research.

These include new work-study programmes with partners like Google and SingHealth, expanding the pedagogy of the university's innovative SMU-X programme, increasing international learning opportunities by developing new partnerships with overseas universities to deliver courses jointly, and expanding digital learning and extending the core curriculum courses.

Under Prof Clark's leadership, SMU has also launched a number of significant research initiatives, including its Centre for Research on Successful Ageing, and the Singapore Green Finance Centre, a collaboration with Imperial College London.

Prior to joining SMU, Prof Clark, who is British, was pro-vice-chancellor for social sciences and health at Durham University in Britain.

He was also the university's executive lead for computer and information services, and estates and buildings.

He is a former general editor of the Journal of Management Studies and was both the chair and president of the British Academy of Management.

He is a fellow of the British Academy of Management and the Academy of Social Sciences.



Under Professor Timothy Clark, Singapore Management University has launched significant research initiatives. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

for online learning, we launched a series of workshops that exposed students to the platforms and tools the instructors would be using.

These included strategies and skills relating to online communication, collaboration and group work.

We also ensured students had access to digital education by distributing computers and dongles to those in need.

As Singapore moved into phase two, SMU maintained a large proportion of our instruction online, but also conducted about a quarter of courses in a "hybrid" mode, with half the students attending lessons in-person and the other half attending remotely in parallel.

Most final exams in term two were moved online, with some instructors choosing to convert their exams to take-home assignments.

This was the first time SMU held final exams online on such a large scale, with close to 1,500 students doing so each day.

We also launched our first-ever 360-degree virtual reality campus tour for prospective students. As part of the open house, 52 live, interactive seminars and 35 pre-recorded information sessions were conducted online.

Q Covid-19 has dealt a blow to the economy. How is SMU helping to place students in jobs?

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HELPING GRADS SECURE JOBS

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PROFESSOR TIMOTHY CLARK

tain their employment status and have targeted support at those still waiting to secure jobs.

We started a matching service where students who have yet to secure full-time work are matched with employers looking to fill vacant positions. Through resume reviews and mock interviews, we prepare students to excel in the job application process. We organised three virtual career fairs in March, May and July last year.

Our Dato' Kho Hui Meng Career Centre has been actively reaching out to employers to facilitate recruitment, and to alumni on offering traineeship and employment opportunities.

To succeed in an economy reshaped by the current pandemic, students must also be adaptable, able to apply knowledge and draw insights from various disciplines.

Our refreshed core curriculum exposes students to a wide range of disciplinary approaches, and students who wish to pursue a second major can do so. For example, a psychology student could take courses in disciplines like accounting, legal studies and computer science.

Q How is SMU weaving elements of work into learning?

A With the current pandemic, SMU recognises how lifelong learning and career resilience are even more critical to help graduates and working adults to stay relevant and

stay ahead.

SMU launched our first work-study programme in 2018 in collaboration with Google and have since launched similar programmes with SingHealth and KPMG.

SMU is now examining how we can further grow programmes that interlace campus studies with industry work. We will be introducing at least two more work-study electives over the next year and will share information on that when ready.

In support of the Ministry of Education's (MOE) plan for 12 per cent of each age cohort to undergo an MOE work-study pathway, we are planning to launch at least one SkillsFuture work-study degree by the academic year 2022, and another by academic year 2024.

These programmes could be in areas like management, social sciences and technology, which are SMU's strengths.

Q With travel restrictions, how are students getting overseas exposure?

A SMU firmly believes in international mobility for students. Since 2018, global exposure has been made a graduation requirement.

Even without the travel component, SMU is offering opportunities such as virtual exchanges, where students can take online courses with other institutions. A total of 110 places with seven universities abroad are on offer for a start.

In addition, students can take undergraduate courses which SMU instructors co-develop and/or co-teach with faculty from the University of California, Irvine and University of Southern California. About 100 seats are available.

SMU has also worked with overseas partners to develop remote global internships and community projects.

Faculty and staff also continue to work with global counterparts on research and collaborations through virtual meeting software.

Q Is SMU still a destination for overseas students?

A In the long run, SMU sees itself as an attractive destination for overseas students. Our location in the heart of the city is a key selling point, keeping us close to the institutions that our graduates aspire to work with.

Last year, SMU had a bumper intake of 2,400 students, compared with 2,100 in the two prior years. International students are presently limited to 10 per cent of the intake, a policy set by MOE.

SMU believes it can accept dozens more full-paying foreign students, without sacrificing places for locals, making for a vibrant community of students who can mix with peers from other disciplinary and cultural backgrounds.

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