

A flexible approach to post graduate education

SMU's MSc in Management offers working individuals an effective platform to balance work and study



AMID changes wrought by the pandemic, students today are looking for more flexible learning paths to help them navigate a more complex working world. In particular, there has been growing interest in blended learning programmes that integrate traditional instruction with technology. For instance, a class taught in a blended format might only meet a few times a term in a classroom, while assignments are accessed and completed remotely.

One such programme is Singapore Management University's (SMU) MSc in Management, offered by the Lee Kong Chian School of Business.

Participants can opt for a part time, blended mode of study that allows individuals to work and study wherever they are, resulting

in less disruption to their current commitments.

The blended MSc in Management (BMIM) offers a unique format that leverages the latest in education technology to facilitate remote learning. Students are only required to attend four on-campus segments across the 18-months of study (the duration is subject to change), with each segment spanning between three to four days each.

The Asian-focused curriculum features case studies written by SMU based on companies in the region and the business challenges they face. All subjects are also presented in the contemporary context of sustainability and ethical leadership, reflecting trends in good management practice that will put our students ahead of the competition.

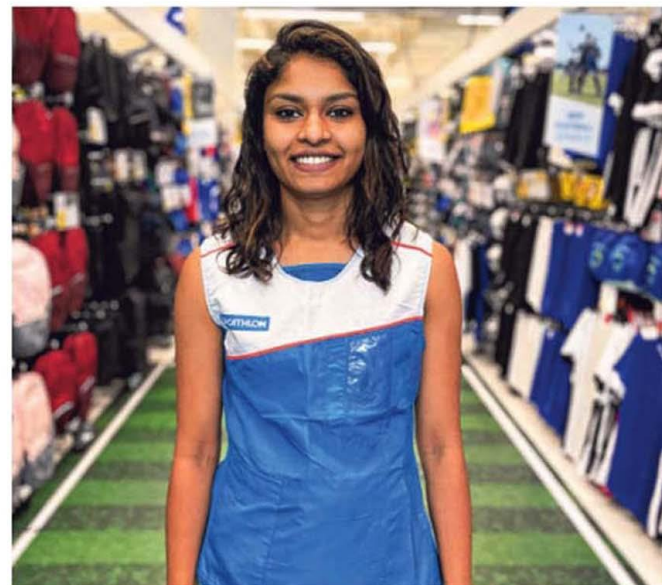
Beyond the programme's distinguished faculty, the university also taps on industry practitioners for their specific expertise and management experience, offering its candidates both academic rigour and industry insights.

The *Business Times* (BT) speaks to a current BMIM student and Decathlon employee, Karthigeyan S/O Muthupandian, and his team leader, Niveditha Sivakumar, to share their experiences of blended learning and how it is relevant to the workforce of today.



The programme's part time, blended mode of study allows individuals to work and study wherever they are. PHOTO: SMU

Experiencing the benefit of blended learning for the business



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Niveditha Sivakumar
Supply Chain Manager, Decathlon

Q: What kind of training and professional development initiatives do your employees participate in?

A: We have training for two aspects of development: one on technical skills that focuses on requirements for the role, and the second on soft skills that emphasise personal development.

We have a Training Academy that gives employees full access to these training initiatives throughout the year, which are delivered by skilled teammates from different business units.

At the beginning of the year an individual development plan is written by teammates, which focuses on their training needs. Encouraging employees to write their own development plans helps them identify their needs in terms of training.

Q: How does supporting such professional development initiatives benefit your business?

A: As a company our priority is our teammates, and training helps them to improve their skills in every area. Having skillful employees is every company's dream, as they are autonomous in their roles and can make confident decisions which are beneficial for the business.

Q: How do you think training and development has evolved in your organisation, and how will it continue to evolve?

A: Training and personal development have always been an integral part of our company and our culture. Keeping this in mind, we are emphasising more on soft skills training. We take steps to create access to these training programmes within the company, or engage an external organisation that can support us.

We have had to adapt and evolve in the last two years because of the pandemic, and this has meant moving to digital platforms to con-

duct training. We will continue to evolve in the coming years to adjust to the new normal.

Q: What are your thoughts on the blended learning format in business education, from your perspective as an employer?

A: I was familiar with the concept and I believe it is an interesting learning format with a lot of value to employees following this learning structure.

Definitely, we as a company are in favour of this format. Those who pursue blended learning are able to have a holistic educational experience, while being able to apply what they learn to their roles every day. This not only enhances their learning, but also helps them gain practical experience.

Q: Do you see blended learning becoming an integral component in organisational training and development programmes, as well as personal improvement, in the coming years?

A: Blended Learning is definitely an interesting concept, and we are able to see the advantage that it brings to our teammates and our business.

We have a few teammates who are pursuing programmes in this format today. We have made accommodations for them to help them cope with their workloads, which will allow them the time they need to fulfil their school obligations. We could say that this is a test phase before we onboard blended learning as a component in our training structure.

Q: What has been the experience of your teammates pursuing blended learning programmes?

A: My teammate Karthigeyan, who is managing Offer and Supply for TeamSports for South-east Asia, is in a blended learning programme. I have heard from Karthigeyan that the experience has been enriching. His understanding of business, strategies and implementation has been very effective, and he is able to bring fresh ideas to the role thanks to this learning format.

Realising his career dreams through a blended learning format

Karthigeyan S/O Muthupandian
Regional Supply & Category Analyst, Decathlon

He is currently pursuing the blended MSc in Management (BMIM) programme at SMU.

Q: Where are you working and what is your role?

A: I'm currently working at Decathlon as a Regional Category & Supply analyst. We're responsible for formulating the strategy of our sports, maintaining the supply of the respective goods, the prices, and the range of our offers.

The company is aware of my aspirations for the future, and yet, they've thoroughly supported my decision to pursue further studies while working with them. I've been with the company for a year now and they've supported me throughout my time at SMU.

Q: How has your perception of blended learning changed since enrolling in the BMIM programme?

A: Prior to enrolling at SMU, I had never heard of blended learning. I was only aware of two mediums in which lessons were delivered: Either physical programmes or online programmes on platforms like Coursera.

When I chanced upon the BMIM, I was initially very sceptical and I wondered how effective the lessons would be. Regardless, I went ahead and enrolled in the programme.

Soon after I started, we were struck by Covid-19 and that was when I understood the true value of the programme.

Many who had enrolled in part-time or full-time programmes that required the student to be physically present had to shift their lessons online. However, the BMIM platform was designed to be taught mostly online. So, with the closure of the campus, the transition to a completely online-only programme was seamless for us. Having gone through the majority of the programme itself, I think the blended learning model is highly engaging and, more importantly, it has allowed me to learn effectively.

Q: Why did you decide to pursue a post-graduate programme in business and what were you hoping to get out of the programme?

A: For a host of reasons. I was interested in running my own business. I hope to eventually take over my dad's business in the future. I have an engineering background, so I realised that there were gaps in my knowledge that I needed to fill. At the same time, I still wanted to go out there and gain experience in the corporate world.

That's when I came across SMU's BMIM. It fit exactly what I was looking for: affordability as well as the flexibility to work and study. SMU is a renowned university, and the Lee Kong Chian School of Business is globally accredited and recognised. That was enough to convince me.

I was hoping to gain management knowledge, exposure to business strategies, and widen my network from the programme. It's safe to say that I've ticked the boxes on all these things.

Q: What has been the experience of participating in the programme been like so far?

A: It is by far one of the best learning experiences I've ever had. The BMIM utilises an award-winning learning platform known as IN-SENDI. It's a highly effective platform that provides me with the flexibility of accessing the materials anywhere, anytime. When I'm



'I think the blended learning model is highly engaging and, more importantly, it has allowed me to learn effectively.'

on the go, I'm able to log on to the platform on my mobile phone and go through the materials. The professors have put in a lot of effort to pre-record lectures and design them to be engaging.

Although we have deadlines to meet, we are able to learn at our own pace. We also have live lessons with the professors, which usually consist of case studies that the entire class will actively discuss.

Q: How does the blended nature of the programme benefit you?

A: Firstly, it has provided me with the autonomy to decide when I want to consume the content on the platform. This allows me to pace myself and take responsibility for my own learning. I'm able to learn from pretty much anywhere: on the train, at home, during lunch breaks.

Prior to live lessons, students will consume most of the materials for that particular week. As such, you're better prepared for the live lesson, and this allows you to apply the learned concepts and ideas through various discussions with the professor and fellow classmates.

Q: How are you able to apply the learnings of the programme to your current job?

A: I joined Decathlon with no experience for the role, and it felt like I was starting from scratch. Decathlon provided me with plenty of training to bring me up to speed. At the same time, it was supplemented with what I was learning through BMIM.

For instance, I've learnt various concepts pertaining to human capital, and I was able to bring up some of what I've learnt and even cite case studies in workshops where we discussed developing human capital within Decathlon. I was also able to better grasp business strategies. This aided me when I had to prepare my business plans.

Essentially, the programme has helped to nurture my confidence as I stepped into uncharted territory. It gave me this sense of belief that I could do it.

Q: How do you think the programme will help you in the longer term as you progress on

your career path?

A: I've gained a lot of exposure to different areas of management, including accounting, strategy, corporate finance, and supply chain management, among others, and we've dived relatively deeply to explore different perspectives in each one. I'm at the tail end of the programme and this has whetted my appetite to further explore certain functions.

It's also given me clarity on the areas where I excel and those where I need to continue working on. Finally, it has given me the confidence that I can take over my dad's business and bring it to the next level.

Q: What challenges do you face juggling work and study, and how do you manage this balance?

A: What's important is gaining the support of your family and loved ones. On most days, I'm cooped up in my room either completing work or my lessons, and at times, it can get overwhelming. And that's absolutely fine. You just have to get back up, dust yourself off and keep moving forward.

I'm extremely grateful to my family, my girlfriend and friends for being understanding and supportive. In fact, there are times when I only meet my girlfriend once every month or so.

So you need plenty of support and, more importantly, the resilience and motivation to push through.

Q: How has your employer supported your efforts to upgrade yourself?

A: They've been fantastic and extremely supportive. The day I stepped in, my department manager looked at me and said, 'Karthigeyan, what's important is for you to successfully complete your programme. And Decathlon will do its best to support you in it.'

And they have given me their fullest support. Whenever I have had difficulty in managing my workload, my team leader or teammates are always willing to help. If deadlines happen to coincide with exams, Decathlon is always willing to postpone certain deadlines just for me. For that, I will forever be grateful.

Q: Would you recommend the BMIM programme to others?

A: Without a doubt, it's a resounding yes! I've personally grown as an individual throughout this programme, gained new knowledge and made good friends. For someone who used to feel that working and studying was difficult, I managed to pull through and that in itself gives you plenty of confidence.

More importantly, the BMIM programme is well-designed. They have excellent professors who are dedicated, and supplemented by great teaching assistants.

■ To find out more about SMU's blended MSc in Management scan the QR Code



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