

Is SMU a good pick for my shy, soft-spoken daughter?

In this instalment of a series on university education, find out how the Singapore Management University turns its students into confident speakers able to engage with people from diverse backgrounds



Sandra Davie
Senior Education
Correspondent

Q My daughter is a top student, but is soft-spoken and rather shy about speaking up. She is keen to take up a business degree and I want to encourage her to go to Singapore Management University (SMU), as I have heard that it puts quite a bit of emphasis on building important "soft skills", including presentation and communication skills. Can I have some advice on this?

A SMU is indeed a pioneer here in using a more interactive pedagogy through small class sizes and a seminar style of teaching.

I have sat in on a couple of seminars, and they were lively sessions. Students shared their views, raised questions and engaged in meaningful discussions with their lecturers and peers.

I also asked two first-year SMU students, whom I would describe as "introverts", how they found the seminar style of teaching.

They both admitted that they initially found it a little stressful when they were called on by their professors to share their views. But now, seven months later, they have become more used to speaking up in class.

One of them, a business student, shared that her professors were very skilful in drawing out the students, especially the shy ones like her. "It helps that they usually gave me a bit more time to respond and valued my comments," she said.

SMU's vice provost in charge of education, Professor Venky Shankaraman, said: "At SMU, we normalise asking questions and group interactions as this is consistently encouraged in every module,



Ms Chua Min Hui (left), who works as an analyst at Goldman Sachs, says her time at Singapore Management University helped her develop confidence in public speaking and interacting with people. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHUA MIN HUI

which presents the opportunity for students to think on the spot and to process and reflect critically on new information as they receive it.

"By the time our students graduate, they are more confident about public speaking and will be able to add value to their work environment through meaningful engagement."

However, Prof Venky stressed that presentation and communication skills are but one set of skills that are listed in the graduate learning outcomes that SMU does seek to nurture in their students.

The other soft skills the university has identified include intellectual and creative skills, interpersonal skills, global citizenship and personal mastery. In short, it seeks to develop work-ready and socially conscious graduates, global citizens, change agents and lifelong learners.

SMU is not unique among universities in drawing up a list of graduate outcomes. What is important is whether they can deliver on it. Based on the stellar job outcomes of its graduates and comments from employers, SMU delivers.

Employers have regularly told me that SMU students are confident, polished and have good communication and presentation skills.

askST you ask. we answer.

Prof Venky said this boils down to the university's education philosophy and DNA, and highlighted how it uses small, seminar-style classes that differ from the traditional large lecture and tutorial structure.

Classes are generally designed to afford every student dedicated time for sharing and presentation, which would not be possible in a large lecture format.

The majority of courses culminate in a group presentation in the final weeks.

Extending this pedagogy further, SMU has launched the SMU-X courses, which are interdisciplinary and emphasise experiential learning through projects aimed at solving real issues faced by organisations.

Teams of five to seven students from different faculties take on real-world challenges by collaborating on projects with corporations and non-profit and government organisations.

At the end of each course, the

teams present their proposals to the partner organisations. Often attended by the top leadership of these organisations, these presentations are an excellent platform for students to hone their professional presentation and communication skills.

In short, SMU-X is a powerful way of learning as it requires students to cross disciplines and gives them the chance to be creative and experience real-world complexities. Students can develop a sense of personal agency as they experience what it is like to make a real difference in industry or the society.

There are also SMU-X Overseas projects, where students work with overseas industry partners or organisations, as well as students from partner universities.

All SMU undergraduates are also required to complete a minimum 10-week internship at a partner company and a minimum of 80 hours of community service often with a partner organisation prior to graduation. These experiences hone the students' professional work skills as well as their ability to communicate in various settings.

Finally, a large proportion of SMU students are also involved in at least one other co-curricular activity. SMU has more than 200

student organisations.

I spoke to Ms Chua Min Hui, 26, a business graduate in 2019 who now works as an analyst in the client management and strategy team at Goldman Sachs.

Before she joined SMU, she would choose to sit alone to avoid talking to people. But she realised that she needed to push herself out of her comfort zone and develop the confidence to interact with people and in public speaking.

She seized the opportunity to take a summer programme at University of Cambridge and a student-exchange programme at Oregon State University, and joined the SMU Ambassadorial Corps where she was a guide to external guests, including foreign VIP delegates on their visits to SMU.

Although SMU requires its students to take on only one internship, she did four - which let her experience working in both a start-up and an MNC.

She said: "Over time, I found myself seeking out opportunities to speak to new people and engaging readily in conversations. Now, I'm someone who loves to meet new people and gets energised from conversations."

sandra@sph.com.sg

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