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By: Loraine Lee

- Recently installed Singapore Management University chairman Piyush Gupta believes SMU can become the "quintessential Asian university"
- SMU can "punch above its weight" in the same way as DBS Bank does, said Mr Gupta, who is DBS group chief executive officer
- Emphasising the importance of cross-disciplinary study, Mr Gupta said SMU can help provide solutions to global problems
- He was speaking ahead of the opening of the academic year

What do DBS Bank and Singapore Management University (SMU) have in common? Mr Piyush Gupta, a man with leading roles at DBS and SMU, said that both have the building blocks to become "quintessentially Asian".

"I found in SMU the same thing that I find in Singapore and I found (in) DBS. We're big enough to have some heft, some resources and some clout, but we're small enough to not be caught up with orthodoxies," said Mr Gupta.

"So you can be nimble and adaptable. You can punch above your weight."

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Indian-born Mr Gupta, 63, who became a Singapore citizen in 2009, is group chief executive officer at DBS, South-east Asia's largest bank by assets. In January this year, he took on the role of SMU chairman as well.

Speaking to the media on Thursday (Aug 10), Mr Gupta said his vision as the university's newest chairman is for SMU to become the "quintessential Asian university" — emulating what he has done to turn DBS into the "quintessential Asian bank".

Quintessential broadly means the best example of a person or institution.

He was speaking ahead of an event held on Friday to mark the start of the academic year

Mr Gupta took on the SMU role after the university's founding chairman Ho Kwon Ping stepped down in January 2023. Prior to that, Mr Gupta had been a member of the SMU Board of Trustees since January 2022.

To achieve the goal he has set out, Mr Gupta said SMU has to lead change in redefining what a successful university looks like, that is to have the ability to make strong, impactful change in the world.

He said that SMU, as a specialised university, does not stack up as well in global rankings as comprehensive universities such as the National University of Singapore or Nanyang Technological University.

But raising SMU's profile on the global stage is achievable based on his experience at DBS, he said.

"If you look at all the rankings of banking, a mid-size bank like DBS will never show up (because) all the big rankings will always go to the banks as size matters and so on," he said.

"(But at DBS,) we were successful. We started getting rated the world's best bank. Not because we were the largest, not even because we are globally present, but because we redefined what it meant to be a good bank."

INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING WORLD SPARKS NEED FOR UNIVERSITIES TO CREATE SOLUTIONS

Mr Gupta said that various challenges facing the world — such as climate change, advances in technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and geopolitical tensions — cannot be solved by individual governments on their own, and that multilateral organisations "do not have the capacity to drive change".

"In my opinion, some of the biggest drivers of this change of reimagining what the future world needs to be will be civil society. And within civil society, universities are going to be a really important platform," he said.

"Higher education in particular has been really important both for creation of knowledge and thinking, and dissemination of knowledge and thinking. There's a dual role."

He also noted that with technological advances, the demand for lateral thinkers will increase.

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“When kids asked me ‘What should I study?’, if they asked me even five years ago, I will tell them: ‘Better study computer science, and study data science,’” he said.

“I’ve changed my (mind). I’m convinced that the people who will succeed are the people who can connect the dots.”

As AI advances and outperforms people, Mr Gupta said that what people can bring to the table is their ability to solve problems, create solutions and think laterally.

This is why SMU will continue “doubling down” on its move towards interdisciplinary learning and applied research — getting students and academics involved in creating solutions to challenges in Singapore and across Asia.

On this note, Mr Gupta said he is “encouraged” by the application rates for SMU’s College of Integrative Studies, which had just taken in its first batch of 100 students this year.

“We were eight times oversubscribed... So you can begin to see the people who are already thinking that way. And my bet is that this is where the future of education is going to be,” he said of the new Bachelor of Integrative Studies programme.

SMU will also aim to encourage more applied research, getting academic staff to come up with more implementable solutions beyond creating citations.

On this front, the university has hired Dr Cheong Wei Yang, senior advisor for health economics at the Ministry of Health, as its vice-provost for strategic research partnerships to create more opportunities to shape SMU’s research agenda.

Acknowledging citations and having research published in renowned journals are what defines a good academic today, Mr Gupta said that SMU will have its work cut out to create “alternate measures for recognition and success” for its staff.

This would include having SMU’s staff members’ applied research recognised alongside their citations, he said, though the exact details have yet to be worked out.

INCREASING ASIA PRESENCE

Mr Gupta also noted Asia’s growing presence in the world and that the “centre of gravity is shifting to Asia”.

“The world’s population is here, the world’s growth is here,” he said, adding that solutions to global challenges are “in our backyard” in Asia.

Beyond the opportunity to leave an impact by exploring solutions to challenges across the region, Mr Gupta added that it is an opportunity for SMU to carve its own niche and stand out.

“When I (joined) DBS, I figured that you don’t really have (a bank which) stands out as the quintessential Asian bank,” said Mr Gupta.

“I think you have the same opportunity and education — the opportunity to stand out as the quintessential Asian university.”

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To do so, SMU launched its first overseas centre in Jakarta, Indonesia last December, and plans to launch two more in Bangkok, Thailand and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam this year.

These centres act as “knowledge gateways”. Like an embassy, these offices help SMU collaborate with more industry partners across the region for the school to further grow “Asian-centric research and Asian-centric solutions”, Mr Gupta said.

Beyond increasing their students' exposure to the region, he added that it is a good opportunity to attract more inbound students from the region.

But Mr Gupta said that focusing on targets too early can be a “risk”.

After setting his vision in motion, “a year or two down the road, you can start honing it down and say ‘okay, what kind of targets do we want, and how do we measure and evaluate?’”

He added that the exact details of how these goals will be achieved will be up to management to decide.

“My role is to be a cheerleader for everybody... at the end of the day, all the wisdom and knowledge rests with the people.”