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New programme combines practitioner-led learning with Asian policy immersion to prepare public leaders for complex decisions

SINGAPORE, Oct. 29, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- As governments turn to artificial intelligence to improve public services, they face a parallel challenge: ensuring that new technologies are used responsibly, equitably and effectively. Singapore Management University (SMU) is launching a new master's programme to prepare public leaders for these demands, with training in digital governance, sustainability and policymaking in Asia.

The Master of Public Governance and Leadership (MPGL), offered by SMU's School of Social Sciences, will equip professionals with the analytical and leadership capabilities to navigate challenges ranging from digital transformation and sustainability to the complexities of governing in Asia. Its curriculum combines practical training, including practitioner mentorship, with academic research, a policy capstone and an overseas learning experience in the region.

"The harder challenges, then, are often not technological," said SMU President Professor Lily Kong. "The gap, in other words, is as much one of governance and leadership as it is of technology."

In her welcome address at the programme's launch, Professor Kong highlighted how governments must address the organisational and institutional barriers that can impede the effective adoption of new technologies, including skills gaps, difficulties accessing quality data, risk aversion and challenges in demonstrating results.

Findings from a survey conducted by SMU's School of Social Sciences during the programme's development point to the organisational consequences of these capability gaps. Of the 147 survey respondents, more than 56 per cent reported that a lack of internal expertise in digital governance would affect their organisations negatively in the preceding

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24 months, with 20 per cent reporting the impact as moderate or significant. The remaining 36 per cent expected the impact to be minor.

Respondents identified three priority areas for building internal expertise: understanding how technology, policy and organisational strategy interact; developing technical knowledge of emerging digital technologies; and strengthening strategic leadership for digital transformation.

"Public leaders today are asked to decide faster, on more fronts, with less certainty than at any point in history. The gap between what they need to know and what they have time to find out is widening. SMU created the MPGL to help close that gap — bringing together scholarly rigour and the realities of practice, so that leaders can make well-informed decisions in a turbulent world," said Assistant Professor Nathan Peng, co-director of the programme.

The MPGL will offer two specialisation tracks: digital transformation and sustainability governance. Both address areas that are reshaping the responsibilities of public leaders, requiring them to weigh competing priorities, assess evidence and understand the consequences of decisions across different groups and institutions.

For example, introducing a digital public service requires leaders to consider more than efficiency. They must also assess whether the service is accessible to different groups, how citizens can challenge an incorrect automated decision, and how its benefits and risks are distributed. The programme aims to develop leaders who can evaluate such trade-offs and translate policy objectives into outcomes that improve people's lives.

More than 60 per cent of the programme's core courses focus directly on applying learning in practice. Students will learn from practitioners and academic experts, examine real-world case studies and participate in a policy capstone that requires them to engage stakeholders and reflect on how their decisions affect others before proposing solutions.

The programme's regional focus will give participants opportunities to examine how governments in Asian cities respond to complex policy challenges within different institutional, economic and social contexts. Through curated overseas learning experiences, they will engage with policy experts and stakeholders and consider how approaches can be adapted to local institutions, resources and community needs, rather than transplanted wholesale from one setting to another.

The programme is designed primarily for early-to mid-career professionals in government, while also welcoming those in business, non-profit and international organisations whose work intersects with public policy. It aims to build a network of practitioners who can work across sectors, where many of today's governance challenges require coordination beyond organisational boundaries.

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SMU aims to enrol 25 part-time students in the inaugural cohort, which will begin in 2027. Over time, the university aims to attract participants from across Southeast Asia and build a cohort of 50 students per intake.

The MPGL draws on SMU's strengths in the social sciences, management, sustainability and information systems, as well as its strategic priorities of Digital Transformation, Sustainable Living and Growth in Asia. The university's regional presence, including its overseas centres in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and recently China, also provides a platform for connecting participants with perspectives across the region.

Candidates who meet the respective eligibility criteria will be automatically considered for the MPGL Scholarship and SMU Masters ASEAN Scholarship. Other scholarship opportunities may also be available, including the SMU Warriors Scholarship and Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship, subject to their respective eligibility requirements.

By bringing together technology, policy and leadership in a regional context, the MPGL seeks to prepare public leaders to make better-informed decisions on challenges that cut across institutions and sectors.

The inaugural cohort is expected to begin its studies in 2027.

Applications and programme information here: www.smu.edu.sg/mpgl

About Singapore Management University (SMU)

Established in 2000, Singapore Management University (SMU) is recognised for its high-impact, multi-disciplinary research that addresses Asian issues of global relevance, and for its interactive, collaborative and project-based approach to learning. Home to over 13,000 students across six schools and two colleges, SMU offers bachelors, masters and PhD programmes across Accountancy, Business, Economics, Information Systems, Integrative Studies, Law and Social Sciences, as well as executive development and continuing education programmes. SMU graduates are consistently ranked among the most employable in Singapore, and command one of the highest mean starting salaries. Through its city campus, SMU enjoys strategic linkages with business, government and the wider community in Singapore and beyond. www.smu.edu.sg

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