



An artist's rendition of the Tahir Foundation Connexion currently being built. It will include an Innovation Bridge that features 500 sq m of incubation space for start-ups and will provide an environment that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship among Singapore Management University students and alumni, and among the larger community. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

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EVENT DETAILS

The Straits Times Education Forum on Nurturing Entrepreneurs is supported by the Singapore Management University.

Date: April 6 (Saturday)

Time: 10am to noon
(Registration begins at 9am, guests to be seated by 9.50am)

Location: Singapore Management University School of Law Building, Basement 1 Function Hall, 55 Armenian Street, Singapore 179943

Cost: Free for ST readers

Online registration:
<http://str.sg/EduForum2019>
Limited seats available.

ST-SMU Nurturing Entrepreneurs

University builds bridges to innovation

In this third of a four-part series, The Straits Times senior education correspondent **Sandra Davie** talks to SMU president **Lily Kong** about the university's stepped-up efforts to nurture entrepreneurs

Many Singaporeans would know of the delivery service Ninja Van. Those into luxury goods would likely be aware of Reebonz, the e-commerce platform for buying and selling luxury goods. They were both businesses started by Singapore Management University (SMU) students who had taken up entrepreneurship programmes during their undergraduate years.

Other SMU student start-ups making a name include Homage, a Singapore-based start-up that connects caregivers with elderly people seeking assistance; Tech in Asia, a media, events and jobs platform for Asia's tech communities; and Carro, a used-car marketplace. In the years to come, SMU hopes that more of its student start-ups will become household names. It also wants its graduates to be sought after by employers for their entrepreneurial mindset.

To achieve this, it is ramping up its entrepreneurship programmes and facilities.

The university offers a variety of programmes for those who want to try their hand at starting businesses – from a major in entrepreneurship to business incubation programmes for students who have good ideas for start-ups.

The 19-year-old university is currently looking at opening some of its entrepreneurship programmes to students in junior colleges, polytechnics and other universities.

SMU president Lily Kong recently announced that the university aims to increase its "innovation density" by positioning its city campus as a meeting point to connect like-minded people with different talents and ideas.

To facilitate this, the Tahir Foundation Connexion currently being built will include an Innovation Bridge that features 500 sq m of incubation space for start-ups and will provide an environment that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship among SMU students and alumni, and among the larger community.

Students can also look forward to more global exposure opportunities with the setting up of SMU Global Centres around the world, starting with the Asean region, in cities such as Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta and Manila.

Professor Kong said the centres will be SMU's "footprint in these cities", helping to seek out opportunities, and coordinate and curate the university's activities, including coordinating student internships, immersion and community service projects.

She explained why SMU was redoubling its efforts to groom entrepreneurs.

Q There is much scepticism about universities taking on the added role of nurturing entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurship programmes are not cheap. So why does SMU want to take on this additional role?

A We often hear of how Singaporeans perform well academically, and in several fields – be it engineering or law or computing. But many also ask why we don't produce the truly entrepreneurial people – the Steve Jobs and Bill Gates of the world. As a management university, we take this to heart and we feel we can make a difference in this space. Nurturing entrepreneurs is important, as entrepreneurs innovate



Professor Lily Kong, who joined SMU as its provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences in 2015, is the university's fifth president.

About Lily Kong

Professor Lily Kong took over as Singapore Management University's (SMU) fifth president in January.

She had joined SMU in September 2015 as its provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of So-

cial Sciences.

A graduate of the National University of Singapore (NUS) and University College London, Prof Kong was a faculty member of the NUS Department of Geography from 1991 to August 2015.

She was also vice-provost and vice-president at NUS, holding

and create profitable businesses that are crucial to the progress of our economies.

But in taking up this role, we want to leverage our strengths.

We don't have a Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) focus like some of the other universities, although we have computing and that is fast expanding.

But where we have a lot of expertise is in how to build on a good business idea, how to grow it and take it to market. And these are the aspects of entrepreneurship where SMU can make a difference.

Q Why do you think universities are the right place to nurture entrepreneurship?

various portfolios, and executive vice-president (academic) of Yale-NUS College.

Prof Kong is widely known for her research on religion, cultural policy and the creative economy, urban heritage and conservation, and national identity.

She sits on the editorial boards of a dozen international journals in her field, and is frequently invited to serve as keynote speaker at conferences in her domain.

An award-winning researcher and teacher, Prof Kong has received five international fellowship awards, including the Commonwealth Fellowship Award and the Fulbright Fellowship Award.

She has also won the Robert Stoddard Award for Distinguished Service (Geography of Religion and Belief Systems), given out by the Association of American Geographers.

Prof Kong was conferred the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2006.

She attended CHIJ (Victoria Street) and National Junior College.

Q So, what is the best way for universities to nurture entrepreneurs?

A We have several programmes – from classes on entrepreneurship, to experiential learning, where we send students to different business nodes of the world to immerse them in the environment.

So, we don't believe there's a fool-proof, fail-safe way of becoming an entrepreneur. But we believe in ex-

posure and a diversity of experiences. The more experiences you have, the more you learn and you start to draw from different ideas.

Sometimes, the experiences may seem unrelated. But it's actually in unrelated ideas that something sparks and you make the connection in ways that other people don't.

Q Entrepreneurship programmes are not cheap, and neither are incubation spaces, especially in the city. So, why are you opening it up to students from other institutions and even outsiders who may team up with your students?

A Again, we believe in bringing diverse teams and ideas together. It is when people from different backgrounds and experiences and mix of skills come together that sparks fly and ideas flow.

Besides, as Singapore's only university in the city, SMU wants to be a place where compelling business ideas are thought up and tried and grown into viable businesses.

Q Although several hundred students take up the entrepreneurship programmes, very few go on to actually launch a start-up and grow it into a viable business. So, are you wasting your money?

A I don't think so, because we don't expect all our students to start businesses. More importantly, we aim to cultivate the entrepreneurial mindset – people who will think out of the box, innovate, be willing to take risks and try new things.

It's a little bit like our School of the Arts, where I participated in the review of the school curriculum.

Should all its students go on to become artists? Or do you want them to have that sensitivity and the sensibility and take that into other walks of life?

You can be an entrepreneur wherever you are – running your own business, working in a big business or a small company, and you can also be an entrepreneur in government. It's really about the mindset.

sandra@sph.com.sg