

COMMENTARY

Fifth university must be special and top-notch



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I was covering the education beat for The Straits Times in the 1990s when the Government was looking into setting up Singapore's third university – what is now the Singapore Management University (SMU).

Every year now, more than 10,000 students vie for 1,700 undergraduate places in several courses including business, law and accountancy at the university, known for introducing American-style teaching to Singapore.

Its graduates have a reputation for being more polished and well-spoken, sought after by management consultancy firms and investment banks.

Yet, there was much worry at the beginning that students might regard the new university as second-class to the more established National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

A lot of thought went into what the SMU's "unique value proposition" ought to be – how to differentiate itself from NUS and NTU, yet serve Singapore and students seeking a quality education that would give them an edge in the job market.

In the end, it was set up as a boutique business university partnering the well-known Wharton Business School from the University of Pennsylvania in the United States.

With Wharton business deputy dean Janice Bellace as its first head, SMU set itself apart from NUS and NTU from the word go, taking in its first batch in 2000.

Unlike the two older universities which had been admitting students based mostly on examination results, SMU used a broad range of criteria – including SAT scores, a panel interview, a reflective essay as well as applicants' other qualities and achievements outside class.

Even some well-wishers questioned the criteria, worried that the university might end up with the worst of the A-level and polytechnic cohorts. But SMU dons, determined to give the university a distinctive character, pushed on. They adopted an American-style approach in teaching, with students taught in small seminar groups of 40 to 50.

To address a common complaint from employers that Singapore graduates did not think on their feet and were afraid to speak up, SMU students were given marks for class participation.

Four years later, employers receiving the first batch of graduates from the new university said they noted an "SMU difference". These graduates stood out for being more articulate, confident and mature.

The then Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam paid a high accolade to the SMU when it turned five, calling it a "change agent of the university space". "It had competed as an upstart with established players and got them to rethink what they themselves were doing," he said.

The same amount of planning and thought went into setting up Singapore's fourth university, the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), which started running its classes earlier last week.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the set-up of the university in 2007, but it took two more years of deliberation before it assumed a more

distinct shape.

One of its unique selling points is its partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US and China's Zhejiang University, combining the best of East and West.

Another innovative feature of SUTD is its curriculum, marrying engineering, architecture and design training.

Recently, however, the university announced that despite receiving more than 4,000 applications, it had accepted only 340 students for its first intake, not the full 500 initially projected.

Officials said the university did not find enough students with the right mix of academic expertise to handle the MIT-designed curriculum, as well as leadership capability and the ability to take risks. As a new university, it also wanted to ensure that its pioneer batch would succeed in their careers.

Even as SUTD finds its feet, the government is looking into setting up a fifth university.

A committee headed by Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong has been studying different university models in Europe, Asia and more recently in the US, to arrive at a model that will serve students and the needs of the Singapore economy.

This time, polytechnic graduates are the main target group. Only about 17 per cent of the yearly cohort gain places in the universities, forcing several thousand to head overseas or attend private schools to top-up their diplomas and obtain a degree.

It makes sense then that the 15-member committee is looking at universities that put a premium on hands-on learning and applied real-world research.

There are many good models from the places Mr Wong's team has visited, including Metropolia University of Applied Sciences in Finland, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, as well as Cooper Union and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in the US. I was among the journalists who accompanied the team on these visits.

What seems to have caught the eye of the panel is Drexel University, a private institution in Philadelphia.

It is ranked one of the top engineering schools in the US, but what makes it stand out is its cooperative education programme that requires all undergraduates to combine job internships with studying towards their degrees.

Those who graduate after five years would have chalked up as many as 18 months' relevant work experience. This has been found to give them a much-needed edge over other fresh graduates in the tough job market.

After taking a close look at the unique programme, Mr Wong said his panel's study trip to the US had affirmed the direction it wants to move in for Singapore's fifth university – it is likely to be a practice-oriented one closely linked to industry and offering programmes that combine work and study.

This is a model that would build on the strengths of polytechnic-trained graduates who are known to be more hands-on workers and attuned to the needs of industry and business.

As Mr Wong noted, at the end of the day, the issue is not merely about expanding university places. It is about choice, quality, differentiation and serving the market in a new way.

Singapore will be hard pressed to compete against China, India and other developing countries as they ramp up their university capabilities. China wants to produce eight million graduates a year by 2020, and India, six million.

There is no way that tiny Singapore can compete against such numbers but if the SMU experience is anything to go by, a new university starting here can aim to produce graduates who are special, who will stand out in unique ways that are good for them and the economy.

Tuned in to industry

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