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How SMU became an agent of change for universities

Arnoud De Meyer and Lily Kong

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Its partnership with Wharton has helped enrich the landscape of higher education in Singapore, two SMU leaders write in response to Han Fook Kwang's column last Sunday.

In last week's Sunday Times, Han Fook Kwang raised interesting questions in "Singapore R&D: Expensive Lesson or Worthwhile Experience?" In fact, he raised two distinct sets of questions.

The first set is on whether the investments in research and development carried out with high-profile international institutions, of which many (but not all) are located on the Create Campus, have paid off.

The second set of questions is centred on whether the collaborations with foreign institutions - such as Yale-NUS, Duke-NUS, Imperial College with Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and, earlier on, Singapore Management University (SMU) with Wharton - have enriched the landscape of higher education in Singapore. As the academic leaders of SMU, we are not well placed to provide insights on the first question, but on the second, we can draw on the SMU experience, and respond with a resounding yes. We believe that the other collaborations have also been very valuable, but others will no doubt have more insights.

We believe the experience of SMU is particularly valuable because we have the distinction of being the earliest to enter into a significant collaboration with an international partner, and thus have the advantage of almost 20 years of evolution and development to reflect on.

BREAK WITH THE PAST

Let us recap how we started. SMU was originally set up as a business school in collaboration with Wharton, the business school of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. From the start, the plan was to build around the business school other schools and disciplines which support management in the broadest sense of the word. Thus five other schools were created around the core disciplines of accountancy, economics, social sciences (with psychology, sociology and political science), information systems and technology, and law.

Singapore Management University was originally set up as a business school in collaboration with Wharton, the business school of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and had the mission to be an agent of change by being fashioned after the US system, according to its president Arnoud De Meyer and provost Lily Kong.

We also had the mission to be an agent of change, to break the mould. SMU departed from the deeply British tradition that the National University of Singapore and NTU followed, by being fashioned after the US system. Our partner Wharton provided lots of inputs and guidance, for example, in the design of the curriculum, the concept of a unique holistic education with small classes, a commitment to community service and a link between theory and practice, as well as many faculty management systems.

The experiment succeeded and over the last 17 years, the SMU team has built a specialised university with close to 10,000 students, 370 full-time faculty members, and with a long-standing successful record of graduating students that employers like. In terms of quality of research output, we are among the top in Asia and the world in some of our disciplines, such as accountancy, business and economics. We would not have been able to build the university that quickly were it not for the collaboration with Wharton. What is perhaps less well known is that we also had an excellent partner in Carnegie Mellon University in designing and implementing the curriculum for the School of Information Systems.

Over the years we have been able to remain distinct. We have a distinctive value proposition, based on a broad-based education coupled with the depth of a major. We offer the breadth and intellectual range of a core curriculum, combined with specialisation in a discipline, including a professional discipline. We keep the commitment to disciplinary rigour while ensuring a strong link with the world of practice. The original commitment to compulsory internships as a key form of experiential learning remains, as do the community

service and seminar-style interactive learning, with team discussions, project work, abundant discursive engagement and presentations in the classroom.

DIVERSE AND DISTINCT

Our distinction today builds on the many ideas and practices that we learnt from and with Wharton. Our pedagogy is constantly evolving. The original mode of experiential learning through internships is now augmented significantly through SMU-X where students work with faculty and industry mentors on real-life projects, with outcomes that are useful and usable by industry partners. Our signature style of small-group interactive learning is now enhanced using technology to expand the opportunities for students to interact, collaborate and contest ideas through technological platforms, for example, with new international award-winning apps and games devised by our faculty. Yes, we started with Wharton and Carnegie Mellon, and they were very helpful. Since then, we have innovated on the original concepts.

Our research remains equally distinctive. While we publish in the top international journals, we are committed to applied and translational research that makes a difference to our society, economy and polity. Our case writing centre is rapidly developing into one of the main sources of case studies on Asian companies. Some of our research centres, such as those focusing on service excellence, economics of ageing, cyber security, and analytics for social and business applications, produce output that is among the top in the world; at the same time, much of our research remains of very high relevance to Singapore.

Some of our ideas and practices have been adopted by other institutions. But our pedagogy is still recognised to be different. And our graduates are still perceived to be distinctive. This provides variety and diversity within the Singapore portfolio of higher education institutions. For Singapore students, this is important because they can then find the approach to learning that best fits their competencies and preferences. We provide a real choice to students who want an environment where they feel comfortable to participate actively and can optimise their learning. We are convinced that the creation of SUTD in collaboration with MIT, Duke-NUS, Yale-NUS, NTU-Imperial and the many collaborations that Singapore Institute of Technology has, will also render Singapore's portfolio of higher education offerings very diverse and attractive.

Why was the SMU-Wharton partnership successful? The partnership worked well because from the start the SMU's Board of Trustees had understood that at some moment in time we would have to stand on our own. Thus we organised ourselves to become independent. One of the most strategic decisions our board made was to establish from the beginning that our degrees were SMU degrees. Until 2011 we had joint research projects with Wharton, and until today we keep very good relations and organise some international programmes for students together. Today our collaboration is built on mutual respect. From the start, SMU was not "Wharton in Singapore", but SMU, that is, a Singapore institution that was to chart its own destiny and development once the initial involvement of Wharton receded. Our successful development illustrates what a Singapore institution can do. Yes, the support we received at the start was very important, but afterwards, SMU grew without the continued presence of the partner institution. We are convinced that this was a very healthy evolution for the local institution.

Could we have developed a new university without Wharton? For sure, but it would have taken a lot more time to get to where we are now. And no doubt there would have been a serious risk that such a new university would have been a copy of the existing ones. We are convinced that the collaboration has been very beneficial for us and for Singapore students. Friendly competition among the different institutions has no doubt improved the overall quality of higher education in Singapore. And we provided an interesting alternative for students and businesses. Times may have changed and perhaps we need fewer of such partnerships today. But they were needed at a particular point in Singapore's development.

* Arnoud De Meyer and Lily Kong are respectively president and provost of Singapore Management University.

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