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### A business school disrupted: A view from Singapore

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The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly changed our world. And though the preparation, rapid response, and early vigilance of the universities and the government in Singapore was admirable **Richard Smith** looks at the challenges still ahead

# A business school disrupted: a view from Singapore





*After the SARS outbreak, the Singapore government ensured that the universities have risk management plans that include a pandemic response. For the past eight years, all faculty must complete mandatory online teaching training and conduct at least one virtual lesson each term remotely as part of the compliance with emergency preparedness measures*

**A**fter noting the early actions in January, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that Singapore was the “Gold Standard” for managing a pandemic. However, the more recent view has turned into more of a cautionary tale as the second and third waves of the pandemic swept through the island.

From the view of a business school in Singapore, the disruption can be viewed in phases:

#### **Anticipation and forecast**

After the China outbreak, the spread of COVID-19 began around the world. On 21 January, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was made in the US and other countries. While there were no cases in Singapore at that time, emergency planning meetings had already started taking place as the busy Chinese New Year holiday was approaching.

The idea that this could be a pandemic was already shared and university leaders were alerted. With the SARS impact in mind, the universities started preparing for contact tracing, temperature taking, travel declarations and communication management. The 30 January announcement of a public health emergency by the WHO, prompted many new measures around the world.

#### **Proactive planning**

After the SARS outbreak, the Singapore government ensured that the universities have risk management plans that include a pandemic response.

For the past eight years, all faculty must complete mandatory online teaching training and conduct at least one virtual lesson each term remotely as part of the compliance with emergency preparedness measures.

Upon joining, the university, all faculty and staff are issued a personal thermometer for reporting temperature. To track movement of employees, a system of travel declaration is ready for deployment as needed. While no amount of planning can prepare for the unknown, this vigilant approach is showing benefit in Singapore.

#### **First wave measures**

With many of our Chinese students returning to China for the annual New Year holiday festivities and many Chinese visitors coming to visit Singapore, the emergency response plan was triggered in the universities.

Self-quarantine measures were put in place for anyone returning from China, temperature screening started and travel declaration forms were required for all students, faculty and staff. Contact tracing measures were immediately put in place as faculty were required to take photos of each class session and carefully document student group activities.

The staff and leadership teams immediately went to a split team arrangement to avoid contact risks. In addition, large classes over 50 students immediately moved to an online format.

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### Early success

Singapore was aggressive in testing and rapid in the response. Most importantly, the general public knew all too well what was required with social distancing. In the business school we had some “Near Miss” cases but the early containment of the outbreak worked well thanks to the vigilance of the well-prepared team.

Due to the rapid response, there were no virus infections transferred in any of the Singapore universities. However, the issue of our returning 400 students scattered around the world on exchange programmes along with the planned overseas programme trips became new challenges.

### Second wave

As Singaporeans and our overseas students began to return to the island from the US and the UK, they brought with them the second wave of COVID-19. This time, it was too challenging to contain.

In the business school we had no cases, but we were alerted that we need to prepare for campus closure. Of course, faculty generally have a view that university rules do not actually apply to them... so this group became a challenge as we had to explain multiple times that they could not come to campus in the future. This all became much clearer when the Prime Minister announced a “Circuit Breaker” exercise (modified lock-down) for the nation for a month.







## 400

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### Temporary new normal

All classes have been running in the online mode and all exams are being conducted virtually. Faculty and student travel is not permitted for the remainder of the calendar year. Overseas study missions, faculty hiring, exchange programmes and international research activities are all put on hold. Graduation, open house, freshman orientation, sporting events, summer study programmes have all moved to a virtual mode or cancelled.

As businesses feel the impact, the ability of our graduating students to find jobs became a significant challenge as even those with simple internships were sent home. As a short-term measure, our faculty and students were able to rise to the challenge with a generally positive view.

### Third wave

The temporary lockdown was extended to another month following the third wave of COVID-19. This time quickly spreading across many of the migrant construction workers residing in Singapore. Unfortunately, the successful vigilance of the citizens did not extend to the management of our visiting workers, which has cast a dark cloud over the city-state. While there are great successes in South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, other Asian countries are also grappling with the challenge. Populous nations such as India, Indonesia, Philippines struggle to keep up with the testing and basic care needed for citizens.

### 2020 new normal

With international travel largely halted, the time horizon for allowing international students to obtain a visa and enter Singapore looks like a distant hope. The government of Singapore has advised the universities to think about this pandemic in terms of years – not in weeks and months.

As a business school, we are grappling with this concept as we rely so much on the international network of business schools for our student experience, faculty research and global collaboration.

### Rethinking assumptions

In our virtual meetings and discussions across the university a number of long-held assumptions are being tested. We have been rethinking such things as: the place of learning; the definition of good teaching; the timing of the learning process; sources of students; qualification of instructors; elements of the student experience; and the differentiation of our institution.

Like many universities, students have started to ask hard questions related to the price vs value of their online learning. At the same time, the interest of hearing directly from the "Sage on the Stage" is waning as students experience the benefits of asynchronous learning platforms and other high-quality digital experiences while being fatigued with online broadcast lectures.

## Potential industry shifts

Stepping back from the local situation and reflecting on the common conversations in business schools around the world, several potential industry shifts seem to be accelerating the transformation of business education. The potential disruption of higher education has been bantered about for several years, and the pandemic may provide the catalyst for bringing about shifts such as:

### • Local classroom to global blends of delivery

When not everyone can be in the same classroom location, we might see the creation of various blends of learning experiences including synchronous broadcasts, asynchronous learning activities, small local gatherings and other tech-enabled experiences through virtual reality or other solutions.

### • Full degree programmes to micro mastery

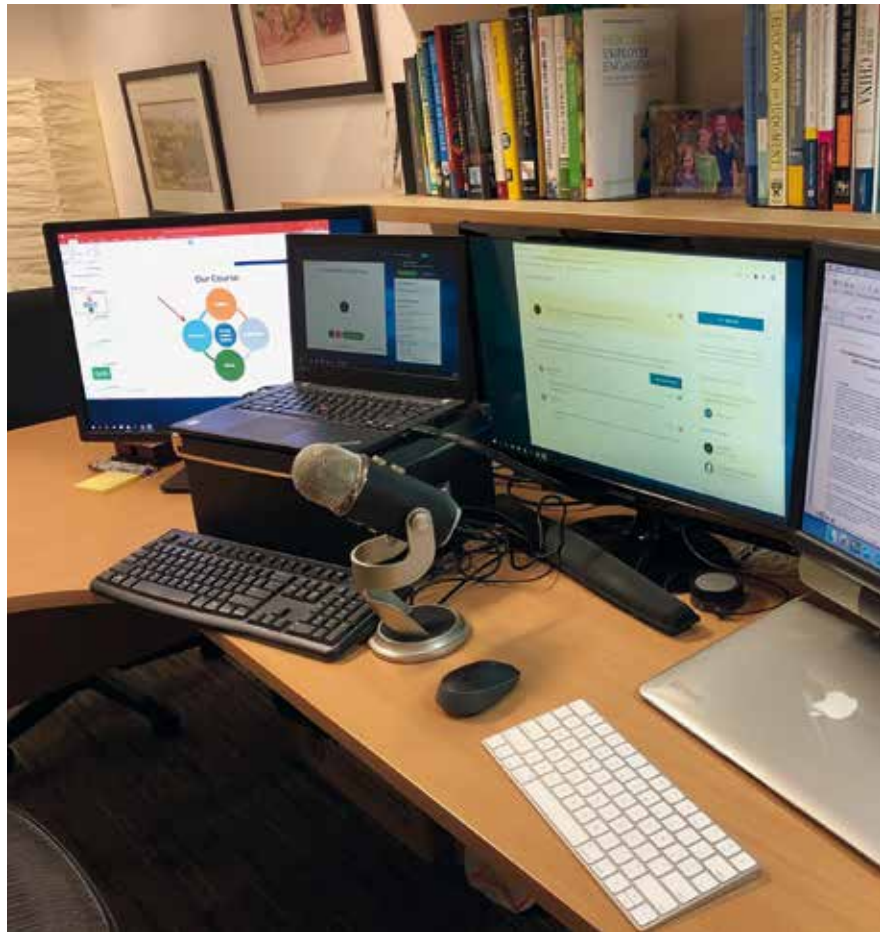
New questions about the price vs value of two-year degree programmes have heightened. As a result, we might see more movement toward the “unstacking” of a degree into groups of courses (or “micro masters”) designed for specific objectives.

### • International exchanges to virtual experiences

As international travel becomes more challenging and expensive we might see the shift to virtual exchanges and experiences as students engage in online learning from schools to engage and cultures without travelling.

• **B2C marketing to B2B partnerships** To address the challenges with placement (which affects enrolment), we may see more schools establishing stronger business partnerships to create tailored curriculum and industry-related options for executive education and degree programmes.

• **Chinese students to diversified mix** The over-dependence on fully-paid Chinese students has created a high-risk profile for a number of programmes and schools around the world.



Trustees and university leaders are likely to insist on diversification strategies for the future.

### • Standard curriculum to customisable degrees

For decades, MBA programmes have crafted careful “cohort experiences” with the right mix of diversity, experiences and challenges to foster life-long student bonds. In the online world, we may see a rethinking of this assumption to create a “cohort of one” to allow each student to customise their own degree and education experience.

• **Professor teaching to student learning** In many school departments the core subjects of business have not changed in years. Students have little choice in their experience and tend to study for the assessments, which serve as evidence of learning. The online formats have raised more questions about the relevance and choice of student learning pathways. We may see more emphasis or allowance for student learning and exploration on diverse topics of business.



### Future Business school questions

While the benefits of management education are still perceived as positive, the questions related to the fees and opportunity costs may continue to put pressure on many business schools.

University systems that rely on government funding are dealing with significant budget impact while private players have seen the declining market value of endowment funds. With every business school forced into disruption at some level, new questions are arising such as:

- Why does every school need their own faculty to teach basic introductory courses?
- With high-quality asynchronous learning, what unique value do local instructors add?
- How do schools re-think the physical infrastructure use and capital expenses?
- What is the cost of business research and what stakeholder groups are providing funding?
- How applicable are the accreditation standards and ranking processes to our new realities?
- What is the right risk profile for a school relative to endowment funding?
- How do we re-shape the myriad of business school alliances and partnerships?
- Why do business schools have limited impact on key social sectors such as healthcare?
- How are business schools making an impact in society in priority areas?
- What is the new agenda for the business school dean in the post- COVID-19 world?

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### Preparing for 2020 and beyond

With questions circling and the future unknown, our school is taking both short-term and long-term actions.

In the short-term, we are doubling up on our investment in online courses as an alternative study pathway for the future. For business schools like ours that rely on large numbers of international students, we must consider alternative learning pathways if physical travel is limited.

While the level of interest in graduate education and the number of applications is high this year, the reality of seeing them on campus is still in question. We are fortunate to be a member of the Future of Management Education (FOME) alliance, which provides us with a high-quality online platform and collaborative partners.

With a view towards the longer-term impact of this crisis, we have launched innovation task forces to address some of the key issues and questions facing management education in South East Asia.

As a school with a strong focus on innovation, there is high interest in making the most of the crisis situation to drive positive change for the future. Our efforts are strongly supported by our government stakeholders as the unfortunate situation of a third wave of infections has raised the level of vigilance and preparedness for the future in Singapore.

As the global situation develops, each business school and country will address the pandemic in their own unique way. Perhaps this overview of the responses, questions, shifts and plans in Singapore is of value as we examine the future in light of the disruption of our business school industry.

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#### About the Author

*Dr Richard R Smith is a Professor at Singapore Management University where he also serves as Deputy Dean for the Lee Kong Chian School of Business.*