Getting the right skills

More universities are now offering postgraduate courses that cater to the fast-changing work environment. BY FRANCIS KAN

NEW disruptive technologies are fuelling a revolution in the global workplace. Automation is displacing traditional jobs, even as new ones are being created to service an innovation-led economy. Indeed, some 65 per cent of primary school students will end up working in jobs that don't exist today, according to a forecast reported in *The New York Times*.

As a result, those entering the workforce will need to possess new skills and knowledge to thrive in such a fast-changing landscape. Meanwhile, mid-career professionals may need to retool their skill sets in order to stay relevant.

Recognising these changing dynamics, progressive tertiary educational institutions are offering postgraduate programmes designed to help today's working professional succeed – whether by tweaking the curricula of traditional courses, such as those in finance and business, or by creating new ones.

"We need to be aware of the transformation that is taking place, and pick up new knowledge that will help us navigate the changing landscape," says associate professor Themin Suwardy, Singapore Management University's (SMU) dean of postgraduate professional programmes.

MORE PROGRAMMES, STUDENTS

Singaporeans seem to be biting, as they seek to upgrade themselves. For instance, the National University of Singapore (NUS) had 5,100 students enrolled in its master's programmes in the last academic year, up 7 per cent from five years ago. Around half of these students are local. It has also added 11 master's programmes since 2011, bringing its total to 114.

SMU, meanwhile, had almost 700 students graduating with a master's degree last year, compared with about 300 in 2011. It currently has 21 master's programmes, up from 12 in 2010. Singaporeans and permanent residents made up about a third of last year's intake.

More graduate students are also looking to learn "adjacencies" – knowledge related to their original area of expertise – to help them better understand their environment. In this regard, MBA-type courses with a real-world emphasis continue to be a popular course of study.

SMU's postgraduate programmes, for instance, have over the years become increasingly practice-oriented, according to Prof Suwardy. "We find that the key to postgraduate education is to go beyond the simple concepts of exposure and comprehension, and move toward integration, synthesis and the ability to create new knowledge. Learning through a mix of case studies, project-based assignments, consultative experiences and internships, our students become both problem-spotters and problem-solvers," he points out.

UniSIM (above) offers courses that are relevant to the needs of teachers and educators who work in a globalised world. UniSIM's Prof Lee (below) says that the university's newer courses provide students with an insight into the methodology of teaching English as a second or foreign language in the digital age.

Beyond mastery of knowledge, today's working professional also needs to learn evergreen skills such as communication, team work and leadership to navigate change and disruption. Furthermore, a graduate programme also helps to sharpen students' analytical skills and prepare them to deal with more complex and unknown problems of the future. SMU helps its postgraduate students develop these skills through a platform known as Professional Development Series (PDS) workshops, where master's students learn interdisciplinary skills beyond their specific disciplines.

At the workshops, students can choose from a range of topics including conflict management, negotiation, the art of giving feedback, design thinking, sustainability, leadership, and innovation. Students are also exposed to the latest research from SMU. For example, students from any discipline can learn more about data analytics and service excellence, among other subjects.

Universities are also introducing new courses that are more relevant to the working world today. NUS has offered three new programmes this year, in chemistry for energy and environment, Chinese culture and language and international arbitration and dispute resolution, to meet higher demand for personnel with such expertise.

SIM University (UniSIM) – which has been earmarked to become Singapore's sixth autonomous university – offers courses that are relevant to the needs of teachers and educators who work in a globalised world. Examples of these courses include "Global English and Language Teaching' and "Academic Discourse: English in a Global Context".

"These courses and others provide students with an insight into the methodology of teaching English as a second or foreign language in the digital age," says UniSIM's associate professor Benny Lee.

One of the university's newer offerings is the MA in Applied Linguistics (TESOL), which saw its first intake of students in July last year. The programme is open to all candidates with a good first degree in English, linguistics or a related field, and is open to both experienced and novice teachers. TESOL refers to "Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages", a professional association with a mission to ensure excellence in English language.

The programme caters to the needs of language teachers of different backgrounds from the local school system and tertiary institutions to the private sector.

Prof Suwardy (above, with students) says that SMU's postgraduate programmes have over the years become increasingly practice-oriented. SMU postgraduate students on campus (below) – the university had almost 700 students graduating with a master's degree last year, compared with about 300 in 2011.

It is also suitable for both experienced language instructors or administrators as well as professionals in other fields who are considering a mid-career switch. Designed with the working adult in mind, the course offers flexible learning platforms, including face-to-face seminars, online recorded lectures, webinars, and other e-learning tools (*see sidebar*).

PLUGGING THE TALENT GAP

SMU's Master of Science in Innovation, meanwhile, is the only Asia-focused programme designed to teach about how to think and act like an innovator and entrepreneur. "It is designed to engage, challenge and grow Asia's next generation of innovation leaders who are ready to think big, disrupt and differentiate. The innovative pedagogy supports Asia's need for new business creation and innovation," explains Prof Suwardy.

Another programme that is geared towards plugging today's talent gap is SMU's Master of IT in Business (MITB), which looks to fill growing demand for analytics and technology professionals who are industry ready. And to cater to the growing field of financial technology (fintech), the university will be launching its new MITB – Financial Technology (FinTech) Track in August 2017.

Adds Prof Suwardy: "It is the first of its kind in Singapore and the world that blends traditional and emerging disruptive financial technology together with business knowledge and innovation. It is the transformative education platform to bridge the present to the future."

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Pursuing specialised knowledge

A GRADUATE of SIM University's (UniSIM) MA in Applied Linguistics (TESOL), Dashni Ravindran, talks about the benefits of undergoing this postgraduate programme.

What were you doing before embarking on this course?

I have been teaching at Si Ling Primary School. Prior to embarking on this course, I was pursuing a part-time undergraduate course of study in mathematics at SIM University while teaching.

Why did you decide to pursue your postgraduate studies?

There were two contributive factors. As a language teacher, I have adopted numerous pedagogical practices in my classroom to facilitate knowledge and skills acquisition amid my students. However, I was unable to instill the excitement to learn the language in students who lacked opportunities to converse in standard English outside the classroom.

Also, I found myself desperately turning to Google and my colleagues each time I struggled to explain complex linguistic forms to my students.

My sister had recently returned to Singapore after completing a master's programme at the Royal Holloway University. Upon hearing my challenges, she had encouraged me to pursue one as I would be acquiring valuable skills and developing my professional competence through a specialised curriculum.

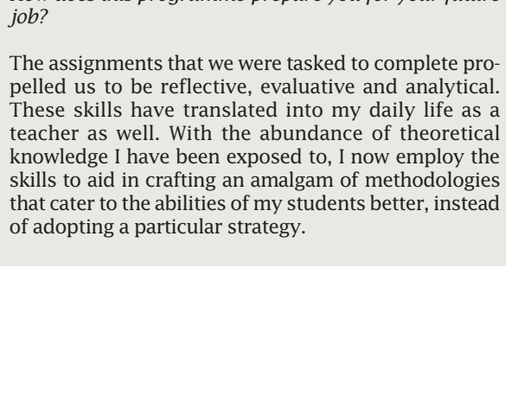
Why did you decide to take up this particular programme in UniSIM?

An advanced degree in applied linguistics was what I had initially wanted to pursue before UniSIM announced a Master's in Applied Linguistics, with concentration in TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages).

The TESOL aspect of this course was very intriguing. This was fitting, as I perceived it to be a good opportunity to learn a plethora of ideas to teach English to students who barely spoke standard English outside the classroom.

What do you feel distinguishes this programme from other similar programmes?

The flexible learning mode is unique to this programme. The Flipped Classroom mode of lesson delivery is observed in this programme. My lecturers upload all course materials one week prior to the tutorial session. Their narrated presentation slides are the highlight. I am rarely left to decipher ambiguous content independently as the explanation that accompanies each slide is very detailed. This affords us ample time to apply the theoretical knowledge to engage in meaningful discussions and tasks.



Ms Ravindran says she has a keen interest in sociolinguistics and educational theories, following her graduation with a UniSIM MA in Applied Linguistics (TESOL).

What are your plans now that you have graduated?

I would love to continue work as a language teacher. This programme has developed in me a keen interest in sociolinguistics and educational theories; in particular, communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching. I do aspire to invest time in pursuing a PhD in the future to deepen my perspective on one of the areas mentioned above.

How does this programme prepare you for your future job?

The assignments that we were tasked to complete propelled us to be reflective, evaluative and analytical. These skills have translated into my daily life as a teacher as well. With the abundance of theoretical knowledge I have been exposed to, I now employ the skills to aid in crafting an amalgam of methodologies that cater to the abilities of my students better, instead of adopting a particular strategy.