

USING THE RIGHT PEDAGOGY FOR STUDENTS WITH, WITHOUT WORK EXPERIENCE

More theory for one, more practice for the other

ANG SWEE HOON



Recently, there has been debate over the quality of degrees offered in Singapore, with much of the discussion centred on the val-

ue of qualifications awarded by local universities versus those conferred by foreign universities through satellite institutions operating here.

For students who have excelled in their pre-tertiary examinations, their path would generally be quite straightforward — they can progress to junior college or polytechnic, and

then to university before working.

Others develop the examination skill later. Some, for instance, may have family and financial issues to contend with, choosing to work before pursuing their tertiary education, often in business, at a later stage of their lives.

From observations, students in

● Ang Swee Hoon is associate professor of Marketing at the National University of Singapore Business School.

these private institutions generally fall into three groups: Part-time students with work experience, those who decided to go back to school full-time after a work stint or those who could not enter our local universities because of various reasons.

TAKING THE CLASS TO WORK

It should first be mentioned that any tertiary education has value. The difference is in the pedagogy required.

Part-time and mature students, for instance, need to be provided with the science behind workplace practices, so that these students can make sense of the rationale behind such practices.

On the other hand, for full-time students with no work experience, their knowledge is grounded on theories that many in the working world might consider as “textbookish” and irrelevant.

For the latter, the key is thus to demonstrate the applicability of such theories. An analogy would be how the United States agent in the '80s television series *MacGyver* applied his scientific knowledge to improvise and solve problems using common household items.

One way that some progressive universities have taken the classroom to the workplace is by introducing long-term industry projects, in which full-time students get immersed in companies.

Working in small groups and mentored by a professor, students become part-time “consultants” at a company for many months, putting into practice the theories they have learnt.

As consultants, students have to help tackle an issue that the firm is struggling with, engage in research and propose implementable solutions to senior management.

These recommendations are also associated with risks, and students have to propose mitigation strategies to circumvent them.

They are trained to think as project managers and develop a 360° view of all the possibilities that can occur, including planning the budget, conducting sensitivity analyses and

providing worst-, realistic- and best-case scenarios.

In the process, students gain intimate knowledge of the firm and industry. They also learn to be critical and discerning, as they have to sift through loads of information to identify relevant data that would be important in formulating implementable strategies that address the issue.

Mr Itaru Nagao, regional manager of Mister Minit, who engaged the students in one such project, said: "I was quite impressed with the professional delivery, preparation and practicality of the students' proposal, which can be implemented immediately. I will be sharing some of the material with our global senior management, as it provides insights into our business here in Singapore."

At the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School, for instance, about 2,000 students and 500 firms over the past eight years have benefited from this university-led initiative, which has evolved to become a compulsory module for the school's honours-year students.

Perhaps because of the rigorous grounding in theory and the taxing time requirements of such projects on full-time students, many have the view that local universities are superior to satellite foreign universities.

VALUE OF PART-TIME DEGREES

When there are working and full-time students together in the same class, there can be wide differences in what the students look for, possibly resulting in a curriculum that meets the lowest common denominator, but not necessarily satisfying any student group. Those with no work experience may look for more academic content, while part-time students will probably want practicality and less theory.

If splitting the class into two groups is not possible because of size or challenges in setting a common examination, a professor who can balance both theory and application is needed. If such a faculty member is hard to come by, co-teaching may then be necessary.

For programmes catering for working part-time students or those with earlier work experience, the call for excellence yields a different metric. While consulting projects help younger full-time students transit to



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the work environment, working students already have that experience.

Instead, for tertiary education to be worthwhile, working students have to be able to see the utility of theories behind workplace practices. Unlike full-time students who put theory into practice, working students have to "deconstruct" the practice into theory.

This may be a more challenging task as working students are often sceptical of theories, perhaps thinking that they are based on too many unreasonable assumptions to be practical.

The other challenge is that students in the workforce are time-poor, because of the exigencies of their jobs.

Some institutions may thus compromise and water down their teaching so the academic content appeals to working students, resulting in the perception of a lightweight curriculum.

But the key is in the approach. Tertiary education for working students has to use a different pedagogy, such as by using work practices as the focus and using them to illustrate how various theories work or do not work.

It becomes reverse engineering of sorts. But to do this effectively, students and professors need to have intimate knowledge of the workplace, where information may be hard to come by. Few companies are willing to furnish data related to their workplace practices, such as financial details.

Professors teaching working students will thus need to work harder for such information. Having vast working experience and industry contacts are invaluable in providing these detailed insights.