



AIEA PROVOST PERSPECTIVES

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A Global City University in Asia in Continuous Transformation

Lilly Kong • Singapore Management University

Provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences





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Name: Lily Kong

Title: Provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences

Time served as Provost: Since September 1, 2015

SMU was established in 2000 with a mission to generate leading-edge research with an emphasis on rigorous, high-impact, cross-disciplinary research that addresses Asian issues of global relevance. It is home to about 9,300 undergraduate, postgraduate, executive and professional, full- and part-time students, and comprises six schools: School of Accountancy, Lee Kong Chian School of Business (LKCSB), School of Economics, School of Information Systems, School of Law and School of Social Sciences, offering a wide range of bachelors, masters and PhD degree programmes.

Professor Kong is a distinguished educator, internationally renowned researcher and senior academic leader. She is widely regarded as a thought leader in the study of culture and religion, with publications focusing on, inter alia, cultural policy and creative economy, heritage and conservation, religion and conflict, globalisation and national identity. An award-winning researcher and teacher, she has also served in numerous capacities as an academic leader at the National University of Singapore and Yale-NUS College, before joining SMU as Provost in 2015.



Given all of the demands and constraints facing higher education today, why did your institution decide to internationalise?

It is precisely because of the demands and constraints facing higher education today that we believe it is essential to internationalise. Working collaboratively, the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. This is even more imperative in a small country like Singapore, where universities, like their home country, need to be connected and to collaborate with others in order to thrive.

In practical terms, the graduates we produce must be able to serve the future needs of Singapore. Given how Singapore is so integrally interwoven with the global economy, our graduates must be able to navigate, succeed and thrive in that global context. It is in this regard that SMU's curricular and co-curricular programmes are designed to foster deep international understanding, sound values and intercultural fluency. One of our key strategies is to ensure our students have access to a range of global learning opportunities at home and abroad. At home, more than 60% of our faculty are from over 30 different countries. This, combined with over 1000 international and exchange students on campus annually, provides a rich and diverse learning environment. Abroad, nearly 90% of our graduating cohort undertake some form of overseas learning through International Exchanges, Overseas Community Service, Overseas Internships, Business Cultural Study Missions and other forms of co-curricular activities. At the heart of our internationalisation priorities is the commitment to prepare competent and creative graduates who want to be relevant to their communities.

Has the role or importance of internationalisation at your institution changed over the past five years? If so, how? How do you see it changing in the next five?

When established in 2000, SMU needed to quickly build a reputation locally, so that prospective students would sign up for a new, untested university. The international link at that time with University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School played a big part in helping to establish the institution quickly; SMU's first president came from Wharton, and many of the ideas and practices at Wharton informed the new institution in Singapore. This has changed dramatically as SMU developed its own strong reputation, with myriad indicators of international success and reputation in research and education. Faculty have won international awards for their pedagogical innovations and research; students have triumphed at the most competitive of international competitions; some of SMU's Schools are among the youngest in the world to earn prestigious accreditations and research ranking; partnerships with more



than 220 universities have been established. Global engagement efforts are now firmly a part of the university's DNA, and the university's reputation and standing is anchored in a national mission situated in an international context.

What were some of the main challenges you and your institution faced in pursuing internationalization? What are some of assets you and your institution drew on for this work?

The main challenge for SMU has been its youth. Fifteen years is a very short time for universities, in the face of well-established ones that run into hundreds of years old. Striking up partnerships with established and reputable universities has necessitated demonstrating that youth is an asset rather than a liability.

A key asset that SMU drew on initially was the link with and help from Wharton. Very quickly, though, the university knew that "God helps those who help themselves". And the key assets quickly shifted to people, people, people -- its faculty, staff students and alumni. The pioneering spirit of all played a tremendous part in convincing the world that this was a young institution worth its salt. Through the strength of faculty and their academic achievements, the energy of students and their international wins in competitions and placements in the best of graduate schools, and the alumni who became the proof of the proverbial pudding, SMU has been able to come into its own, and in the last 10 years, has been able to develop strong partnerships with over 200 quality institutions around the world. Our international partners are also one of our greatest assets as their close cooperation and endorsement help us to reach out to the world.

What is an example of an internationalization effort on your campus that was not completely successful? Why was that the case, and what did your institution learn from it?

SMU, as its name implies, began as a business and management school, but quickly evolved into a broader based social sciences University, with Schools of Accounting, Economics, Social Sciences, Information Systems and Law. But the name of the university and the early collaborations are skewed towards Business Schools or Departments of Management. This has limited the scope of our collaboration and exposure to counterparts in other fields of study.

We have learnt that, as an institution, we had to work extra hard to communicate what the university stands for, and the range of disciplines represented. This continues to be work in progress.



Conversely, please discuss an example of an initiative that did work, and why.

SMU's Living Analytics Research Centre (LARC) is a joint initiative with our longstanding partner Carnegie Mellon and a host of industry partners. LARC brings together data mining and machine learning, statistics, social and behavior science, management science, and the science of social and behavioral networks, in ways that can transform and expand computational social science so as to develop new applications that benefit individual consumers, private sector organizations, and the public sector. The collaboration has entailed researchers from both universities successfully putting up a major grant proposal to Singapore's National Research Foundation, collaborative research and publication, and PhD student mobility.

Such international partnerships have benefitted both universities and can become a model of synergistic and multi-level engagement.

Who are the most important stakeholders you work with regarding internationalization at your institution?

I work closely with SMU President Arnoud De Meyer who works tirelessly to front the university at many international events. I am also closely supported by the Deans of our 6 Schools, Vice Provost (UG Matters and Student Development), Vice Provost (Research) as well as the SMU International Office to drive our partnerships and implement international programmes of high quality.

What are some of the key ways in which senior international officers can help individuals in your role advance internationalisation at their institutions?

SIOs should see themselves as having a "helicopter" role – externally they should be scanning the environment and keeping up to date with the latest, global, regional and national trends and realities. Internally, they should be building productive working relationships across the campus and keeping a close watch on the academic and research pulse of the University. Indeed, it calls for a special and committed individual who is both good with people and very comfortable with analyzing and acting on hard data. Internationalisation is a resource intensive and should be managed as a strategic activity.

Campus culture can determine the extent to which internationalisation is embraced. SIOs need to be able to lead and stimulate frank and open discussions on campus to bring awareness of the benefits and attendant issues



associated with being a global campus. Culture changes slowly and requires regular, congruent and sincere communication. significantly boosting our students' confidence in English, of providing institutional support for expanded aspirations, and of giving bright young Hong Kongers (only 20% of secondary school graduates in Hong Kong secure a place at a government-funded university) points of access to a much larger world.

Is there anything else you would like to share with senior international officers or fellow chief academic officers?

I believe that each University will need to respond to Internationalisation in a way that reflects the underlying vision and mission of the university. Increasingly, for many of us, the opportunities presented are more numerous than the institution has capacity for. It is important to have a firm grasp of the character of your institution, and equally important to establish a collaborative consultative process that can help bring champions to the forefront. Internationalisation is a whole-of-university effort. In many ways, a University's sustained international positioning is closely tied to how senior management can harness its internal strengths.



The **Association of International Education Administrators** (AIEA), a membership organization formed in November 1982, is composed of institutional leaders engaged in advancing the international dimensions of higher education. The purposes of the Association are to:

- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

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