

Chapter 8

A Design Thinking Odyssey: Measuring and Documenting Graduate Learning Outcomes in the Co-Curricular Space

Alvin Sim

Singapore Management University, Singapore

Paulin Tay Straughan

Singapore Management University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

Co-curricular experiences should be warranted a fair amount of attention in higher education, particularly for their ability to help students develop real-world employability skills and a platform for them to critically reflect upon and expand their perspectives. These are crucial in developing the future-ready graduate – the type of graduate the Singapore Management University (SMU) strives to nurture. Yet, the authors have discovered that many students go from one activity to another without understanding what they can actually be getting out of these activities and how each activity connects to life after university. This has led the authors to seek to address the problem: “How might we rethink the purpose and delivery of co-curricular learning?” As part of the design thinking odyssey, this chapter details the prototype SMU has embarked on to measure and document students’ learning in the co-curricular space.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the ongoing design thinking journey in co-curricular learning which we have embarked on in the Singapore Management University (SMU). The process entailed a reframing of the purpose and delivery of co-curricular learning, which, in turn, shaped our ideas on how the learning outcomes can be measured and documented.

Established in the year 2000, SMU has consistently placed a strong emphasis on students’ character building and holistic development. The University has developed structured programmes in both career

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development and community service, and a vibrant student life environment including more than 150 meaningful co-curricular activities in the diverse areas of arts, sports and others, for students to engage in learning and development beyond the classroom. These co-curricular components of the SMU education complement the University's academic mission, providing the valuable platform for students to apply their classroom learning, prepare for their future, broaden their passions and contribute to making a meaningful difference in society.

In order to achieve SMU's vision of delivering transformative education for a new generation of graduates (Vision 2025), it is necessary to be clear, as a University, what the desired graduate learning outcomes are. The Graduate Learning Outcomes refer to the university-wide highest learning goals that are important to the University for all undergraduates, regardless of their discipline areas. This set of SMU Graduate Learning Outcomes (See Figure 1) was established as a result of the work of the SMU Blue Ribbon Commission on Undergraduate Education which was formed in April 2017. As a result of the work of the Commission, a set of SMU Graduate Learning Outcomes was established: Disciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge; Intellectual and creative skills; Interpersonal skills; Global citizenship; and Personal mastery. In short, SMU seeks to develop broadly educated individuals, with depth of knowledge in selected domains, and workplace capabilities required to thrive in the 21st century.

In order for SMU to nurture graduates who are independent in mind and able to think both deeply as well as broadly, graduates will need to have developed intellectual skills of critical thinking and problem solving, as well as creative skills of innovative and entrepreneurial thinking. They will also require personal mastery, being self-directed and meta-learners with resilience and positivity. Graduates who are dependable in deeds will need to have nurtured interpersonal skills of collaboration, leadership and communication. The SMU graduates' strong disciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge are the bases for deep and broad thinking. Lastly, graduates who create value at home and abroad are those who are able to combine their intellectual skills with a strong sense of ethics and social responsibility, and who appreciate their roles as citizens, locally and globally.

CO-CURRICULUM: TOWARDS A HOLISTIC, FUTURE-READY EDUCATION

Changes are enveloping the higher education landscape in unprecedented respects. Globally, there has been a clarion call from various quarters to urgently address the perceived skills gap of graduates. In fact, many of the gaps identified relate to non-disciplinary-specific skills and attributes which include critical thinking, complex problem solving, communication, collaboration, intercultural competence, ethical decision-making and socio-emotional intelligence (Hart Research Associates, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016; National Association of College and Employers, 2020). Undoubtedly, the traditional notion of learning being confined to formal didactic instruction and exclusively to the acquisition of knowledge has proven to be woefully inadequate in addressing the needs of the dynamic workplace of today and the future. As such, the value and significance of co-curricular learning in higher education ought to be re-examined.

A distinctive feature of the SMU education is the development well-rounded students through experiential learning via its diverse co-curricular platforms (including student clubs and societies, mandatory internships and community service projects). All SMU undergraduates are required to complete minimally 80 hours of Community Service and a minimum 10-week internship attachment at a partner company prior to graduation. A large proportion of SMU students are also involved in at least one other

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