

Universities of the 21st Century may soon be an economic pillar in Singapore, where education could be the product that may be sold.

The buzz word for Singapore universities is advertising - it is all about attracting the best students, and dangling different perks, leading some to believe that schools are run like commercial entities today. Many schools are moving towards business-like management, and training students to meet the demands of the job market. Marketing strategies are constantly employed to attract the best. The question is: should education be considered as a product to be marketed?

His thoughts echo SMU's Provost Tan Ching Tiong's, who insists that there is a distinct difference in SMU students compared to those from the other universities, and that the advertisements are justified. "SMU graduates are more confident and outspoken," he noted. Mr. Lee added: "I think it is fine for a school to have these marketing strategies. If companies can do them, universities can do the same, as long as they deliver what they have promised".

In the advertising saturated world that we live in today, students are more aware of the school choices that they have. Institutes are operating in a competitive recruitment market, where aggressive marketing strategies are the norm to woo the student dollar.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) is one such example. It uses branding slogans to emphasize a unique and lively educational experience. Advertisements about SMU redefining tertiary education often adorn the pages of local newspapers here and they seem to be effective. "I chose SMU because the school culture is vibrant and exciting, like what the advertisements say. It is different," said Mr. Aaron Lee, 22, a second-year infosystem management undergraduate at SMU.

It is an ironic testimonial - Schools are excelling in their 'marketing' that students have learnt to 'brand' themselves in everything that they do. Workshops that teach students resume writing, personal etiquette and interview skills are regularly organized by all three universities to prepare the undergraduates for the corporate world. Students have also looked upon new developments in their universities as marketing tactics. In the same way that companies are seeking to brand themselves with improved facilities, schools are also building better facilities for the students.

Ms. Samantha Tan, 21, a second-year business student at the National University of Singapore (NUS) shared: "A perfect example would be the recent plans to build a new University Town. It is unnecessary, and the money should be used to improve the quality of education. I am a marketing student, and I know that these are gimmicks." She is referring to the NUS University Town that will be built by 2010, modeled after Ivy League hostel living in America.

The new development is likely to cost some \$600 million, and students are questioning the feasibility of this plan. "Instead of channeling resources to improve policies and existing infrastructure, they are coming up with bells and whistles that will cost students higher school fees. I paid much

less when I was still in a polytechnic, and the computers were excellent. All we have now are computers that are breaking down," she continued. However, the NUS school administration believes that the higher school fees are warranted, with NUS Vice Provost Lily Kong confirming that facilities will definitely be improved.

Like how companies face competition, universities are also competing against one another. School rankings can be one example. They can also reflect how university education can be treated as a commodity, like cars and computers to be bought. Schools are rated and evaluated by magazines, allowing students and their parents to choose accordingly.

But some questions remain - should universities be run like commercial companies? Should the focus be on market expansion and improving their bottom line?

RELIGION PLAYS A BIG ROLE IN DRUG REHABILITATION

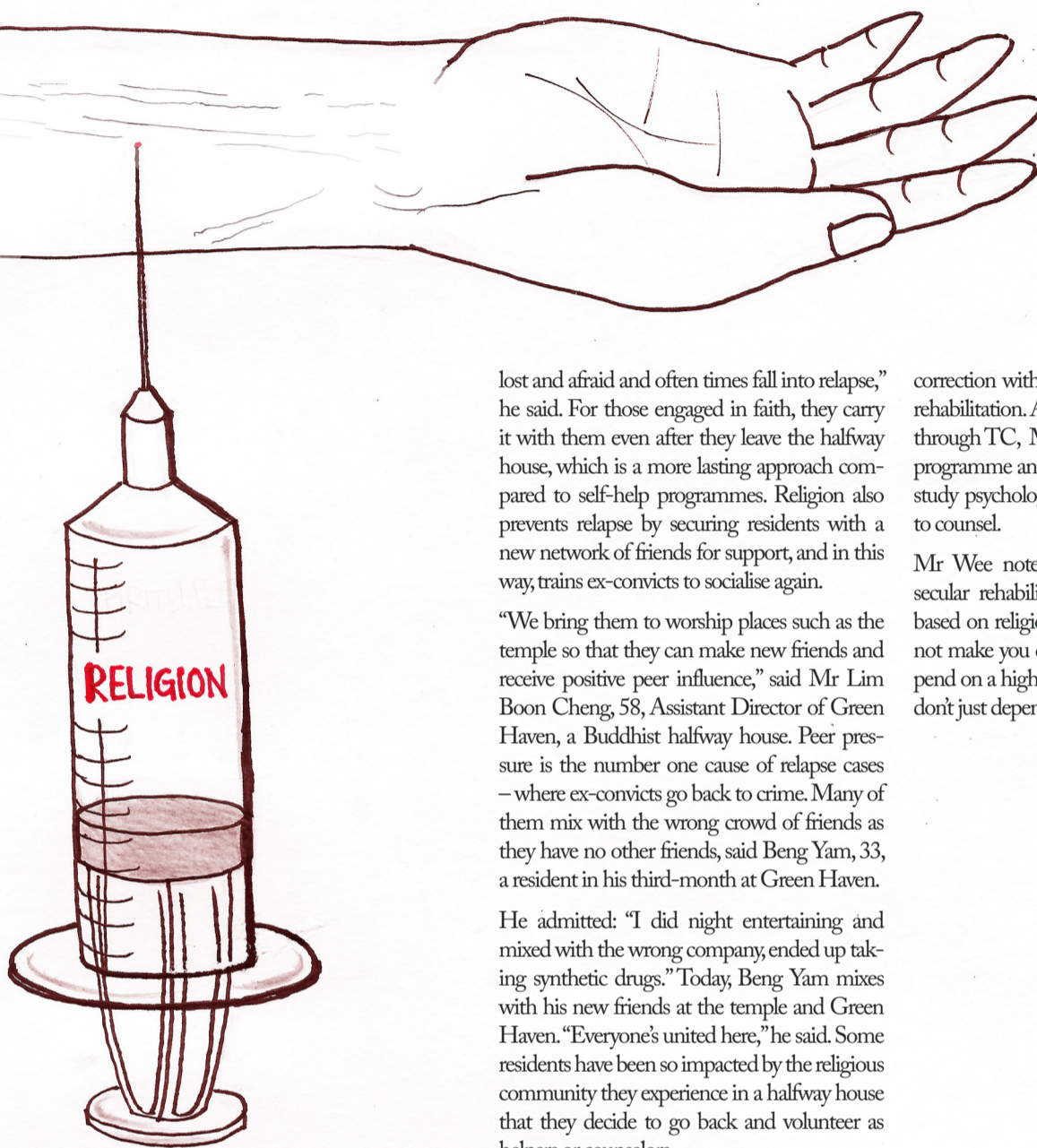


Illustration by Vimal Kumar

To cure a man from drug addiction, engage him in religion. This is the belief for most of the halfway houses in Singapore.

All halfway houses here are faith-based. Part of the Singapore Prison Service's (SPS) Halfway House Scheme, they serve as a transition period for selected ex-drug addicts who have just been released from prison, but still need momentary monitoring and rehabilitation before they are fully released back to society. The period of residence can range from 6 to eighteen months.

Besides halfway houses, SPS also has the options of the Home Detention (HD) Scheme and the Residential Scheme. These involve electronic tagging or random reporting. But in most of the halfway houses here, "faith is a fundamental importance," said Mr M. Supramaniam, 56, Operations Manager at The Ashram, a halfway house for Hindus and Sikhs.

Halfway houses in Singapore, whether they are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Catholic, share one commonality: all of them practice daily meditations in the morning and evening, and they engage residents extensively with teachings in their respective faiths.

"We know the actual healing is in the spirit of man, not so how much he works or how much he can build up his body – these are just the physical, external aspects," said Assistant Director Freddy Wee of Breakthrough Missions, a Christian halfway house. The 54-year-old believes that when drug addicts work on themselves internally, they can understand themselves better, be convinced that they need to change and then respond to these realisations by taking action.

"They must be convinced within themselves and be challenged to respond to something higher. This response produces change," said Mr Wee, who used to be a drug addict himself and was admitted to a Christian halfway house in 1978. "They will realise that they are now responding not only to themselves but to God. So they know that they are not alone in life."

Indeed, religion helps to keep ex-drug offenders accountable even after they leave the halfway house. Said Mr Supramaniam: "Nobody will be there looking out for ex-convicts 24 hours and 7 days to check on what they're doing. But if they do bad things, having a faith means (they know that) God checks." Mr Supramaniam notes that such spiritual surveillance is not as stifling as being detained in prison or at home.

"When you confine a person, you aggravate his feelings. He may pretend to be listening and to be humble to officers, but the moment they are out, they are very robust and they don't care," said Mr Supramaniam, who used to work in the police force. "Once they're released, they're

lost and afraid and often times fall into relapse," he said. For those engaged in faith, they carry it with them even after they leave the halfway house, which is a more lasting approach compared to self-help programmes. Religion also prevents relapse by securing residents with a new network of friends for support, and in this way, trains ex-convicts to socialise again.

"We bring them to worship places such as the temple so that they can make new friends and receive positive peer influence," said Mr Lim Boon Cheng, 58, Assistant Director of Green Haven, a Buddhist halfway house. Peer pressure is the number one cause of relapse cases – where ex-convicts go back to crime. Many of them mix with the wrong crowd of friends as they have no other friends, said Beng Yam, 33, a resident in his third-month at Green Haven.

He admitted: "I did night entertaining and mixed with the wrong company, ended up taking synthetic drugs." Today, Beng Yam mixes with his new friends at the temple and Green Haven. "Everyone's united here," he said. Some residents have been so impacted by the religious community they experience in a halfway house that they decide to go back and volunteer as helpers or counselors.

Mr Stanley Ngian, 35, an ex-drug addict who currently stays in Breakthrough Missions, wants to volunteer after his term as a resident ends. "Faith helps us look forward and provides us with a mission in our lives," he said. Out of the 15 staff in Breakthrough Missions, only one or two are not former ex-convicts.

This sense of mission, felt by Mr Ngian, has spawned many Christian halfway houses to open up here in Singapore. There are over ten of them today. However, Green Haven is the only Buddhist halfway house and The Ashram is the only Hindu halfway house. Currently, there are also only three Muslim halfway houses. Mr Lim of Green Haven attributes that "Christians are on the whole more missionary; they feel that this is their duty."

He notes that "Buddhists lack behind in this" and "Christian volunteers are willing to commit their time daily, whereas for Buddhists, we mainly volunteer only on Saturdays and Sundays," he added. Ex-convicts can choose which halfway house they want to go to, but SPS does the arrangement and has the final say.

Psychological tests and counseling are carried out to see if an ex-convict is ready for a halfway house. At The Ashram, Mr Supramaniam said that it currently only has 10 residents even though it can hold a maximum capacity of thirty-five. Observed Mr Lim: "There is indeed a disproportion." The programme bases itself on psychology theories such as the social learning approach, where interaction with others and

correction within oneself are key facilitators to rehabilitation. A drug addict himself who went through TC, Mr Momad succeeded from the programme and was later sent to New York to study psychology so that he could come back to counsel.

Mr Wee notes that the difference between secular rehabilitation programmes and those based on religion is that, for the latter, "it does not make you depend on your own". "You depend on a higher being to see you through and don't just depend on yourself," he said.

Spirituality is a major facilitator in helping drug addicts stay on the right path, according to halfway houses here.