

# **The Marketisation of Higher Education: A Comparative Case-Study of Two Universities in Singapore**

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## ***Abstract***

*This paper focuses on the discursive practice of higher education in Singapore. Specifically, it compares and contrasts how the pressures of globalisation and increasing competition have shaped the discursive practices of two universities in Singapore, the Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University, as they endeavour to 'market' themselves through their respective prospectuses targeted at potential students. The theoretical framework and analytic approach adopted in this study relate to what is known broadly as 'Critical Discourse Analysis', which delves into the dialectical relationship between discursive and social structures, to show that discourse is not only socially constituted but socially constitutive (Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 1993). The analysis, which focuses on the construction of interpersonal meanings through both visual and verbal means, shows how one prospectus maintains a relatively university-centred and authoritative voice while the other adopts a more student-centred stance and assumes a more egalitarian relationship between students and the university. Both, however, are seen to succumb to the pressures of 'globalisation' and 'marketisation' (Fairclough 1993), which force the universities to operate as if they were 'ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers' (Fairclough 1993: 141). The implications for higher education are discussed.*

Keywords: *Marketisation, Universities, Singapore, Critical Discourse Analysis*

## **1. Introduction**

The focus of this paper is on higher education and how the pressures of globalisation and increasing competition have shaped the discursive practices of two universities in Singapore. Specifically, the paper compares and contrasts how a more established university, the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and a relatively new player in the field, the Singapore Management University (SMU), 'market' themselves through their respective prospectuses targeted at potential students. By examining the two university prospectuses, my aim is not only to show how socioeconomic pressures have shaped their discursive structures but also how they can in turn shape social structure through the identities and relationships the universities have constructed in relation to their potential students and the public at large. This dialogic relationship between discourse and society can therefore be construed in dialectical terms, in which one supports and is supported by the other.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first provides a background of the two universities and situates the current prospectuses being examined within the broader discourse of higher education in Singapore. The second section then sketches the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA within which this study is situated. This provides the necessary contextual frame for a comparative analysis of the discursive structures, including both verbal and overall semiotic patterns, of the

two university prospectuses in the third section. The fourth and final section draws on the various analyses to discuss their broader social implications, focusing on the dilemmas faced by institutions of higher learning in Singapore in the way they construct their identities and (authority) relations and the way they are perceived and construed by their potential students and the public in general.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 The universities**

Before 2000, the small island-nation of Singapore had only two universities, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). According to its website (NUS website), NUS's history as Singapore's first university can be traced all the way to 1905 with the founding of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Government Medical School from which NUS was said to have evolved. But the present National University of Singapore, as most Singaporeans know it, was formed more recently through a merger between the former University of Singapore and Nanyang University in 1980. NTU's roots reportedly date back to 1955 when Nanyang University (or 'Nantah', as it was more affectionately known) was set up as the first Chinese-medium university in Southeast Asia, although the present Nanyang Technological University only came into being in 1991 when it took over the Nanyang Technological Institute, which was established to educate practice-oriented engineers for the burgeoning Singapore economy. Thus, for at least a decade, both NUS and NTU enjoyed the prestige and privilege of being the only two universities in Singapore into which students from Singapore and the region competed to gain admission.

This near monopoly on university education was challenged when a third university, the Singapore Management University (SMU), opened its doors to students in August 2000. Unlike both NUS and NTU, SMU is a privately managed but government-funded university offering a specialized yet broad-based business curriculum modelled after that of the top-ranked Wharton Business School of the University of Pennsylvania in America. Following a highly successful though controversial advertising blitz, which promised a 'different' educational experience for its students, and a recent move to its brand new campus with state-of-the-art facilities in Singapore's city centre, SMU has issued the challenge and the gauntlet has formally been thrown down to NUS and NTU. As Assoc Prof Tan Thiam Soon, dean of the Office of Admissions at NUS was quoted as saying: 'The world is not just divided between NUS and NTU, we have to work now to attract every single student,' (*TODAY*, March 4 2005).

The entry of a third university in Singapore follows a deliberate government policy to increase the number of graduates in line with the government's goal to move towards a 'knowledge-based economy', which places a premium on an economy driven by the knowledge and skills of its people not to produce and imitate but to value-add and innovate. Thus, there is a distinct shift from a highly elitist to a more diversified system of higher education, which also included postsecondary polytechnic and technical education. This expansion and diversification of higher education in Singapore has resulted in a dramatic growth in student enrolments, which saw a sevenfold increase in the two public universities from 1960 to 1990 (Viswanathan 1994: 3). Quantity, however, is never sacrificed for quality in Singapore's pursuit of educational excellence, since admission is merit-based and Singapore's leadership

'jealously guards its erosion in any form' (ibid). While entry into the universities remains fiercely competitive, the three universities are pulling out all the stops in the race to attract the best and the brightest from Singapore and beyond. This strife towards quality education seems to have paid off when NUS was ranked fifth on the list of Asia's best, multidisciplinary universities while NTU was ranked ninth on the list of Asia's best science and technology universities in the 2000 survey carried out by *Asiaweek*. On the global rankings according to the 2005 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, NUS comes in at a respectable twenty second position while NTU is just inside the top fifty at forty eighth position. These are by no means meagre achievements for institutions with relatively short histories.

## **2.2 Globalisation**

Faced with this fierce competition not only among themselves but also to climb the world rankings ladder, the response from Singapore's universities seems to be to go 'global'. Essentially, the term 'globalisation' refers to 'all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society' (Albrow 1990: 7). However, due to its multifarious nature and wide applications, ranging from the economic and technological to the sociocultural and political, the term 'globalisation' has taken on a polysemous character. For instance, while Giddens (1987) sees globalisation in terms of the world capitalist economy, the global information system and the nation state system and Barber (1995) characterises it in terms of a 'McWorld' (a homogeneous global network based on a market imperative), others like Appadurai (1990) have focused more on the dynamic sociocultural landscapes ('ethnoscapes', 'technoscapes', 'ideoscapes, etc.) – the spread of people, cultures, technology and ideologies – that globalisation has produced. Thus, it is not surprising that the term 'globalisation' has come to be regarded as a polymorphous buzzword, used by different people in different contexts meaning different things (Croucher 2004). To some, it is a panacea; to others, a curse. For some, it is radically new; for others, merely old wine in a new bottle (Robertson 1992; Scholte 2000). Nevertheless, most people would agree that the different meanings and significances of globalisation converge on the notion of flow and mobility: mobile capital, mobile people and mobile cultures. With innovations in transport and communication technology, especially high speed, low cost connections and the digitisation of data, the flow and exchange of ideas and cultures will be unprecedented. This will in turn impact education in significant ways: by de-territorialising the competencies and sensibilities that are rewarded, it generates powerful centripetal forces on what students the world over need to learn to emerge as productive, engaged and critical citizens of tomorrow.... The work of education will henceforth be tending to the cognitive skills, interpersonal sensibilities and cultural sophistication of young people whose lives will be engaged in local contexts yet suffused with larger transnational realities' (Suarez-Orozco 2005).

Part of what this paper aims to do is to examine how Singapore's universities have interpreted this global phenomenon and responded to the challenge of globalisation. Ostensibly, all three universities appear to have moved in a similar direction of forming alliances with global universities, and the more internationally well-known and prestigious the better. SMU, as mentioned earlier, has already got on the right footing by getting a top business school in Wharton to help it get on its feet. NUS has also been quick to forge links with top universities like Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Peking, just to name a few. Not to be outdone, NTU has also made alliances with

Stanford, MIT, Berkeley and Shanghai's Jiaotong Universities. Furthermore, NUS recently announced plans to offer joint and double degree programmes with prestigious universities like University of California, Berkeley, Cambridge and Yale Universities, in which students will be offered degrees endorsed by both NUS and one of these partner universities. According to Ms Linda Lorimer, Yale's vice-president, 'universities have to prepare students for the world, not just to work within the boundaries of their respective countries' (*The Straits Times*, January 15 2006). In a public lecture given at the University of Malaya in 2005, the NUS President, Professor Shih Choon Fong, envisaged that 'In the 21st century, globalization [will be] a powerful driver of relentless change – the world economy will become even more dynamic, more competitive, and more interdependent ..... [and will be] shaped by flows of talent, ideas and innovation across physical and political boundaries'<sup>1</sup>. He further warned that in the face of this 'rapidly changing, intensely competitive knowledge based global economy, universities may slip into a crisis of obsolescence' (ibid). Presumably, it is this desire to stay relevant and competitive so as not to 'slip into obsolescence' that has propelled the universities in Singapore to forge global alliances and, in the process, shape new identities and nurture new relations. As Alan Goh, Director of the Office of Admissions at SMU, said: 'The old model in which you sit back like a retailer is long gone. Today, you need to take a marketing approach to recruitment.' (*TODAY*, March 4 2005) It is in this context of an intensely competitive, 'globalising' higher education landscape in Singapore that we focus on how two of Singapore's universities, NTU and SMU, compete to 'market' themselves through their publicity materials. Specifically, the focus is on their prospectuses for the 2005/6 academic year.

### **2.3 The university prospectus**

A university prospectus is basically a document of the university's programmes and activities, designed primarily to inform prospective students about the university's entry requirements and its available programmes, although it is not uncommon for universities to package the information in such a way as to persuade prospective students to apply for admission. In this sense, the university prospectus slides along a continuum between telling and selling. In the subsequent analysis of NTU and SMU's prospectuses which will focus on the construction of interpersonal meanings through both visual and verbal means, I will show how one university prospectus maintains a relatively university-centred and authoritative voice while the other adopts a more student-centred stance and assumes a more egalitarian relationship between students and the university. Both, however, will be shown to succumb to the pressures of 'globalisation' and 'marketisation' (Fairclough 1993), which force the universities to operate as if they were 'ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers' (Fairclough 1993: 141).

In this light, the university prospectuses can be seen as an instantiation of the 'commodification of language' (Fairclough 1995; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999), which refers to language being subject to the economically driven impetuses and processes of performativity and efficiency, competing with other commodities in an open market environment to attract the attention of consumers through effective marketing and packaging. The traditional role of university prospectuses to provide students with objective information about programmes and courses offered and entry requirements therefore becomes subjugated to the imperative of promoting the university and accentuating its appeal to target 'consumers'. In this sense, the lines

between 'telling' and 'selling' (Fairclough 1994: 257) therefore become blurred. This ambivalence has implications pertaining to the identities of universities that are constructed for public consumption, as well as the (authority) relations between academics and students.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework and analytic approach adopted in this study relate to what is known broadly as 'Critical Discourse Analysis', which delves into the dialectical relationship between discursive and social structures, to show that discourse is not only socially constituted but socially constitutive (Fairclough 2001; van Dijk 1993). Simply put, contemporary discourses like university prospectuses are not merely a reflection of societal norms and structures, but are instrumental in reproducing and even reinforcing them (Foucault 1972; Pêcheux 1982). In particular, proponents and practitioners of Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA, for short, are interested in the way in which social structures are discursively realized, enacted and reproduced. Thus, by showing how the two universities' identities and authority relations are discursively realised in and through their prospectuses, my aim is also to relate this changing discursive structure to the changing social structures in terms of how one feeds into and reinforces the other in a symbiotic manner.

CDA is a relatively young field of linguistic inquiry which has its roots in critical linguistics, which is a branch of discourse analysis that goes beyond the description of discourse to an explanation of how and why particular discourses are produced. The term 'critical linguistics' was first used by Fowler et al (1979) and Kress and Hodge (1979), who believe that discourse does not merely reflect social processes and structures, but affirms, consolidates and, in this way, reproduces existing social structures. To critically minded discourse analysts like Fairclough (1995), public discourses like university prospectuses which are freely available to interested members of the public are not only a product or reflection of social processes, but are themselves seen to contribute towards the (re)production of these processes. The interest of analysts working within the CDA paradigm is not only in examining discourse to uncover meanings but also the processes by which these meanings are produced and interpreted; in short, the focus is not only on what is the meaning but how this meaning came to be.

This present study draws its inspiration from a similar study done by Fairclough (1995) on the marketisation of discursive practices as a process transforming the public discourse of British universities. According to Fairclough, British institutions of higher learning are making major organisational changes which accord with a market mode of operation, by making departments more financially autonomous and devoting much more resources to marketing. There has also been pressure to regard students as 'customers' and to adopt more learner centred approaches towards teaching (1993: 141). By examining Lancaster University's undergraduate prospectus, among other discourses of higher education like advertisements of academic positions, Fairclough was able to highlight the destabilisation and reconstruction of institutional and professional identities on a more entrepreneurial and promotional basis, to illustrate the wider discursive shifts in authority relations and identities prevalent among British universities. While Fairclough's study focused more on the diachronic changes that appear to be affecting the discursive practices of British higher education, my interest here is more a synchronic comparison of the discursive responses to globalisation made by two universities in Singapore.

## **4. Analysis**

The subject of the analysis, as shown in Appendices 1 and 2, is constituted by excerpts taken from the student prospectus of NTU and SMU, respectively. The NTU prospectus takes the form of a booklet, with the title ‘The New Undergraduate Experience: your passport to a complete education’ on its cover. What is shown in Appendix 1 are the first two pages of this booklet. The SMU prospectus takes the form of a pamphlet which folds into four sections of eight pages in total. The first page depicts a young man holding a paper kite with the words ‘imagine your future’ and the university name and logo printed on the top right hand corner. What you see in Appendix 2A and 2B are two pages from this brochure. 2B was originally printed against a bright pink background.

As this study adopts the view that meaning is to be seen as a composite of the various semiotic elements that constitute a communicative act (in this case, the prospectus), the following comparative analysis of the two university prospectuses will focus on the visual and verbal meanings in turn.

### **4.1 Visual meaning**

The overall structure and form of the NTU prospectus is imitative of a passport, with what appears to be official immigration and customs stamps (‘05 – 06’) found within the pages of a passport perceptibly printed on both pages. The numbers, of course, refer to the academic year 2005--06 for which the prospectus is produced. This passport theme is further accentuated in the words ‘your passport to a complete education’ printed on the cover of the prospectus. The choice of this passport metaphor is calculated to draw a parallel between the educational experience at NTU and a journey to foreign lands which opens up new vistas of experiences and affords the undergraduate exposure to a global experience beyond the confines of the NTU classroom walls in tiny Singapore. This ideology of connecting the NTU experience with what the world can offer is signalled visually through the use of colour to connect the words ‘NTU’ and ‘world’ with an arrow pointing from one to the other on the first page. The value of acquiring this ‘global outlook’ in a ‘global economy’, as we will see, is amply highlighted within the verbal structure of the prospectus.

The SMU prospectus, on the other hand, adopts the form of a brochure, replete with colourful visuals, catchy slogans and even what appears to be a personal testimony by a student in his/her own handwriting. The visuals in the SMU prospectus, compared to the NTU one, take centre stage not only because of the bold use of colour and their (top central) position but also the proportion of space they occupy in the page. Even the second page which has no colourful pictures stands out in bright pink. As such, at a glance, the SMU material is much more eye-catching compared to the NTU one. This heavy reliance on visual appeal is redolent of slick, commercial brochures that seek to advertise and sell a product/service rather than a university prospectus that provides objective information for students’ reference. While the employment of a passport theme by NTU certainly represents a creative departure from more conventionally structured university prospectuses, the SMU prospectus certainly goes further in breaking conventional boundaries of what a university prospectus can or should look like. This ideology of breaking boundaries or defying conventions, as we shall see later, is reinforced in the verbal part of the SMU material.

While both prospectuses use photographs in a prominent way, it is the SMU photographs that demand much greater attention than the one used in the NTU

material. There are several observations that can be made here. First, the photograph used by NTU, depicting four smiling youths, was clearly chosen to depict the main ethnic groups in Singapore – Chinese, Malay and Indian – as indicated by their names<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the three names which are clearly associated with the three main ethnic groups in Singapore, the name ‘Alice’ is perhaps a token acknowledgement of the western culture that is very much part of the sociocultural fabric of modern Singapore (although the female youth pictured above the name is recognisably of Asian, perhaps Chinese, origin). This carefully managed ethnic representation in the NTU photograph is indicative of the university’s desire to position itself as an equal opportunity university that does not discriminate against any local ethnic group in Singapore. It can also be interpreted as a politically correct move to reproduce the image of racial harmony (note the smiling faces and arms over shoulders pose) that is very much at the heart of Singapore’s sociopolitical construction. In contrast, the SMU photographs show a more cosmopolitan image of SMU, with two Caucasian men prominently depicted on the visually salient top left corner of the first page. The close-up, near-frontal shot also draws them into sharper relief compared to the other photographs, which seem to depict various scenes and activities within the university, culminating in the graduation shot. In Kress and van Leeuwen (1996)’s terms, the photograph of the two Caucasian men can be seen as ‘portraits’ embodying some timeless essence or quality whereas the others are ‘snapshots’, depicting some activity or event. This can be interpreted as SMU’s endeavour to underscore its ‘western’ heritage, being linked to America’s Wharton School of Business, over the other facets of university life depicted in this montage of photographs. Perhaps, it is this, more than the other aspects of what SMU has to offer, that constitutes its greatest appeal, or at least that is the perception SMU wishes to create.

Another observation that can be made about the photographic images in the prospectuses is the way they have been ‘put together’. In the case of the NTU prospectus, it is a singular photograph shown in a fairly conventional ‘landscape’ format; in SMU’s case, however, we notice the asymmetrical lines that constitute the borders between the four different images, which depict various diverse situations in different physical settings (in a lecture theatre, at a computer lab, on a stage during graduation, etc.). Thus, quite apart from the contents or what Kress and van Leeuwen refer to as the ‘represented participants’ of the photographs, which portray cultural diversity albeit in different ways and to different degrees, the way the photographic images of the two universities have been organised and presented also expresses a different message about the varying degrees of unconventionality and diversity that the two universities are prepared to embrace and embody.

## **4.2 Verbal meaning**

The analysis of the verbal meaning embodied by the prospectuses focuses on two main aspects – the construction of identity and relations – in line with the aim of this study to examine how the two universities have responded to the pressures of globalisation by (re-) constituting their identities and (re-) positioning themselves in relation to their student (clients), in order to remain competitive in the ‘new economy’.

In terms of identity construction, we observe that the NTU prospectus constructs the institution (i.e. NTU) as the subject in a number of sentences:

At NTU, we are a hub of international connectivity...  
NTU embraces a complete education...  
NTU provides diversity of campus life...  
NTU offers a Complete Education.

The focus therefore is quite clearly on what the institution is or does. The SMU prospectus, on the other hand, seems to highlight a wider diversity of subjects, including the students (*I just love the way we learn*), the modes of instruction (*traditional lectures and tutorials are deliberately avoided*), the university (*We involve, nurture and evolve our students*) and the programmes (*practical internships give SMU personal real-world perspectives*). The focus therefore is not on the institution *per se* but the various facets of the SMU experience, which apart from highlighting the institution and its programmes, also foregrounds the students and their experiences. In fact, there seems to be an almost deliberate and calculated attempt to downplay the role and hence presence of the institution by choosing passive structures that obscure the agency (SMU) and highlight the affected (the students). Examples of this include:

traditional lectures and tutorials are deliberately avoided...  
seminar style teaching is adopted.  
Classes are kept small to maximise interaction...  
students are exposed to different cultures.  
Undergraduates are encouraged ...

This is made eminently clear on the first page of the SMU material in the piece of faux testimony by a presumed student gushing about how he/she loves the learning experience and is 'already living the new economy'. By appropriating the personal testimony genre, the page gives voice and hence identity to the students studying at SMU, which stands in stark contrast to the NTU material which foregrounds the institution at the expense of its students. In fact, apart from the photograph, the students at NTU appear to be totally voiceless and faceless in a text that is ostensibly targeted at them. The overall impression created is therefore a rather university-centred image for NTU, compared to the more student-friendly and student-empowering image constructed by SMU, epitomised by the statement: '*Empowered, you speak up*'.

Another noteworthy observation about identity construction relates to the way both universities overtly signal their subscription to the global economy by emphasising how their programmes are relevant to the 'new, global economy'. NTU's passport theme, as mentioned earlier, represents an overt attempt to underscore the relevance and value of its programmes within a global economy. Furthermore, by emphasising NTU's 'international connectivity' and 'cosmopolitan outlook' that embraces 'a vibrant, multicultural, open minded and inclusive community that sees and seizes opportunities beyond the parochial', the 'global' message is resoundingly clear at the beginning of the first page. This emphasis is sustained in the second page which highlights the types of skills needed for employability in the 'new global economy'. It even does so by invoking the authority of the Singapore government, a reference perhaps indicative of NTU's status as a government subsidised public university:



In the new global economy, the acquisition of skills for changing jobs or entirely new jobs [sic], is the key to maintaining employability, as the Government's Economic Review Committee's Sub-committee on Enhancing Human Capital notes.

Not to be outdone but invoking a different, perhaps more powerful, authority, SMU speaks through the voice of the (presumed) student in the 'testimony' exclaiming that he/she *'is already living in the new economy'*, whatever that means. On the second page, the emphasis on *'creativity'*, *'pushing beyond boundaries'*, the *'ability to think outside the box'* and an *'attitude borne of the times'* are all consonant with the types of skills and competencies associated with the discourse of the new 'knowledge economy' that the Singapore government has often emphasised. If this reference to the 'global economy' is only implicit, then the emphasis on the specific programmes that SMU offers its students makes this explicit and beyond doubt. The reference to practical internships that provide *'real-world perspectives'* and exchange programmes that provide *'invaluable insights and experiences, especially when students are exposed to different cultures'* underline SMU's recognition of the value of a global education in a global economy. Thus, in no uncertain terms and often appropriating the voice and authority of others, both NTU and SMU are seen to subscribe to the expectations and demands of this new, global economy that Singapore has openly embraced, as part of their identity construction.

Let us now move on to the interpersonal dimension to explore how the two universities have constructed their subject positions in relation to their prospective students.

As mentioned earlier, the NTU material seems to have adopted a relatively university-centric position in relation to its target readers, compared to SMU which seems to downplay the institutional presence in favour of a more multifarious representation of university life, which, among other things, gives voice to its students. In foregrounding its identity and role, NTU appears to have ironically distanced itself from its target students whom it is trying to reach out and appeal to through its prospectus. In fact, throughout the prospectus, students are only mentioned once indirectly through the reference to 'graduates' on the second page, and even then they are conceived as 'results' or products of NTU:

In short, NTU offers a Complete Education. The result is graduates that are market-ready and relevant.

Thus, throughout the NTU prospectus, the spotlight is really on the university and the power it can wield over its students, who are constructed as passive products rather than active agents in control of their educational experience. This stands in stark contrast to the way SMU claims to empower its students through its programmes, while almost deliberately downplaying its role and agentivity in the students' learning experience:

Empowered, you speak up. Unafraid, you step out.

By giving voice and power to the students, SMU thus seeks to raise the status and esteem of its prospective students, putting them almost on level terms with the university, which is contrary to the traditional authority position that universities set up for themselves as gate keepers to students who compete to gain admission. This student-friendly position that SMU appears to establish through its prospectus is unlike NTU's which, while trying to impress prospective students with what it can offer them, ends up distancing them and cutting them off from the university life it so

badly wishes to draw them into. The authority relations with its target students constructed by the two universities are therefore quite different: NTU creates a top-down, authoritative subject position whereas SMU adopts a more egalitarian stance in relation its students.

This difference in subject position and hence interpersonal distance expressed by the two university prospectuses is accentuated by the more liberal use of personal pronouns in the SMU material compared to the NTU one. Quite apart from the ‘testimony’ where we would expect a prevalence of the first person pronoun, we notice the use of personal (both first and second person) pronouns also on the second page, which creates a closer, more intimate relationship between the university and the target students. Sentences like:

*We* involve, nurture and evolve *our* students.

Empowered, *you* speak up. Unafraid, *you* step out. [my emphasis]

give the impression that the writer is speaking directly to the readers and exemplifies what Fairclough (2001: 52) calls ‘synthetic personalisation’. While the sense of personal intimacy is certainly not to be mistaken as bona fide, hence ‘synthetic’, these sentences do succeed in drawing readers closer to the writer. This contrasts sharply with sentences like:

In short, NTU offers a Complete Education. The result is graduates that are market ready and relevant.

which create a more distant and impersonal tenor. Consider an alternative reformulation which produces a much more personal and friendly tone:

In short, *we* offer a Complete Education, which makes *you* market-ready and relevant.

To be fair, the NTU prospectus does make use of first person pronouns at the start of the prospectus in:

Welcome to NTU, where the world is *your* classroom.

At NTU, *we* are a hub of international connectivity... [my emphasis]

just as the SMU material also makes use of impersonal formulations such as:

Undergraduates are encouraged to fulfil a term or a year of their degree overseas, with one of the many distinguished and reputable universities who partner SMU in this exchange plan.

Taken as a whole, however, I think it is fair to say that the NTU prospectus uses fewer personal pronouns compared to the SMU one, thereby contributing to a more formal and distant tenor compared to the more intimate and friendly relationship that SMU has created with its prospective students. It is again ironic that NTU, which seems to recognise and valorise ‘interpersonal skills’ as part of its ‘Complete Education’, fails to demonstrate this finesse in its own discourse.

Another linguistic feature that contributes to the general tenor of formality in the NTU material is the prevalence of nominalisations such as ‘connectivity’, ‘acquisition of skills’, ‘employability’ and ‘entrepreneurship’. This coupled with the use of fairly formal lexis (‘parochial’) and fairly long sentences add to the general density of the text, making it less accessible and reader friendly, compared to the SMU text which uses less formal, but more impactful language and structures like:

What is this ability to think outside the box? Or to realise there is no box to begin with. It's an attitude borne of the times. It's an SMU attitude.

The use of the question, minor clause and contractions harmonise to create a rather casual, even trendy voice that resonates with teenaged youths at the threshold of a university education. This is further reinforced through the use of colloquialisms like:

I'm already living in the new economy!  
Isn't this just so cool?

In summary, while NTU does attempt to reach out to its target students through the fairly unconventional use of the metaphor of university education as a journey into the world where the NTU education is the passport in a bid to connect with the 'new global economy', it continues to cling to a more traditional university-centred stance, where power and authority are still very much the privilege and prerogative of the university. SMU, on the other hand, perhaps influenced by its American culture and its 'business savvy', being after all a business oriented university (with a clever slogan: *SMU – where education is our business*), adopts a much less authoritative stance, downplaying its role and diminishing its power as a gate keeping institute of higher learning, and giving greater voice, status and power to its students in order to make them feel empowered to take charge of their own learning. In this sense, SMU appears not only to acknowledge but to *embody* the sort of interpersonal sensibilities and entrepreneurial creativity that are supposedly critical qualities of the new economy (Suarez-Orozco 2005).

## 5. Discussion

What I have shown in the above analysis of the two universities' prospectuses is how the discursive practices of the two universities surveyed have been shaped by the external pressure to globalise to make their programmes relevant to the 'new economy'. There is also a distinct shift in authority relations, albeit to different extents, between the universities and their potential clientele, in terms of how the universities have constructed their identities and subject positions vis-à-vis their target students. This shift can also be construed as a response to global shifts towards marketisation, a process which subjects public discourses to the same market imperative that drives private enterprises to package their services in such a way as to maximise sales and hence profits (what Fairclough (1995) refers to as 'commodification of language'). The way SMU, for instance, has chosen to package its prospectus as a colourful brochure to attract the attention of its student-clients and to promote itself via visual and verbal moves calculated to make them feel important and empowered is quite clearly a marketing strategy to help SMU compete against the more established universities like NTU and NUS. This is also very much in line with SMU's attempt to position itself as 'different', (where '*traditional lectures and tutorials are deliberately avoided*'), unconventional and creative ('*to realise there is no box to begin with*').

This emphasis on SMU's 'difference' builds on earlier publicity campaigns that have used existing SMU students and faculty members as 'models' in advertisements with assertions like: *Peng Fong is different. He's an SMU student. Peng Fong approaches problems from all angles.* This 'difference' that SMU supposedly embodies in its programmes and mode of delivery and allegedly reproduces in its graduates in terms of their creativity and confidence ('*Unafraid, you step out*') is a thinly disguised attack on the other two (more established) universities in Singapore, which have been

criticised for producing book smart graduates who lack confidence when operating in the real world and creativity when having to solve real world problems. It is unsurprising, therefore, that such marketing ploys have incurred the wrath of NUS and NTU and have stirred up some controversy in the media in recent times, with NUS and NTU dismissing SMU's branding slogans as baseless while SMU insisting that such 'US-style methods work' (*The Straits Times*, January 29 2003). If recent enrolment figures are anything to go by, then it would seem that SMU is right: while enrolment for NUS and NTU has remained largely unchanged, SMU's intake has jumped from 306 students in its pioneer batch in 2000 to 600 in 2002 and 1,213 in 2005 (SMU Press releases, 7 August 2000, 19 August, 2002 and 20 August 2005, respectively). While these figures may reflect the interaction of several factors, not least of which is SMU's move to its brand new, city centre campus in 2005, it has to be acknowledged that at least some of it point to the success of its marketing strategy.

It is likely that this success that SMU has enjoyed in attracting students has forced NTU to conceive of and package its 2005-6 prospectus in a less conventional way. If this move proves rewarding in terms of a larger enrolment, it would almost certainly catalyse NTU and perhaps NUS too to step up their own marketing efforts to produce publicity materials that match or even surpass SMU's in terms of student appeal, a trend which has already begun with all three universities trying to 'ad value' through colourful advertisements in local newspapers (*The Straits Times*, March 19 2004). As a result, university prospectuses may become increasingly more promotional and less informative, as the emphasis shifts from telling to selling. As the traditional role of university prospectuses to provide students with objective information about programmes and courses offered and entry requirements becomes gradually subjugated to the imperative of promoting the university and accentuating its appeal to target 'consumers', the lines between telling and selling will become increasingly blurred, producing an intertextuality that hints at the cracks and slippages in purpose and intent. This is already evident in the NTU prospectus, which treads the fine line between giving students information about the various schools and their programmes and courses (under the 'contents' section on the first page), and the more promotional discourse on NTU being a 'hub of international connectivity' promising students a 'complete education'. This ambivalence stands in contrast to SMU's relative unequivocality in its promotional posturing, and perhaps points to NTU's unease over relinquishing its control and position as an authoritative body that has the power to act on its students and adopting the more subordinate, nurturing role that SMU appears to be playing.

More significantly, this process of discursive change may in turn first destabilise and subsequently transform students' and indeed the public's perceptions and expectations of what university education is about and restructure not only the identity and function of universities but also the relations between academic staff and students. As universities continue to 'welcome' students with their 'open-minded and inclusive' system in a move towards globalisation, students and the public in general would come to expect these universities to become more accepting and accommodating, even with those who do not meet the conventional entry requirements. In the interest of 'empowering' the students, potential strengths would be placed above previous weaknesses, promise of success above past failures. In the old paradigm, a blemish in one's academic record might have resulted in automatic rejection; in the new paradigm, the promise of ability, whether or not demonstrated or demonstrable, will tip the scales in favour of the same student. Such expectations, borne out of the

discursive structures of university publicity materials, may eventually compel universities to relinquish their traditional role as gate keepers and reposition themselves as a service-provider in an increasingly competitive market milieu. No longer would they be able to rest on the laurels of their long history and past achievements; instead, they would need to continually rejuvenate and reinvent themselves to remain relevant and competitive and not slip into 'obsolescence'. No longer can they cling on to an authoritative, university-centric position that they might have enjoyed for decades due to a lack of competition; instead, they would need to welcome and embrace students in a more egalitarian way, both discursively as well as materially. Similarly, academics cannot afford to pontificate from the lofty heights of their ivory towers but must be more down-to-earth not only in the content of what they teach but also the method of their delivery. In order to more effectively reach out to their students, they would need to refresh their 'wares' and reconstitute their roles by customising their services to the needs and interests of their student-customers. Students, as consumers of higher education, will then have the freedom of 'shopping around' and the power to choose the 'service provider' that best meets their needs and appeals most to their interests. In this new world order, it is students who choose the universities and not the other way round.

As we can see, therefore, it is no longer social pressures that shape discursive practices in a unilateral way but, equally, it is the discursive practices that can also contribute in a substantive way to fundamental transformations in social structures and relations in a mutually reinforcing and supportive way. The relationship between discourse and society then becomes a dialectical one, in which discourse is not only socially constituted but socially constitutive.

## **6. Conclusion**

The traditional position of universities as gate-keepers endowed with the intrinsic power to grant or deny admission to potential students and, with it, the power to bestow social status and economic privilege have evidently been eroded by 'market forces' in an increasingly competitive and 'globalised' higher education landscape. From being an exclusive and exclusionary bastion of academic and scholarly knowledge, universities in Singapore appear to have become, in form, as well as function, a business enterprise more keen on wooing potential fee-paying customers than maintaining its lofty scholastic standards and exclusivity. As university identities and relations undergo substantive restructuring away from authoritarianism towards egalitarianism, the ramifications will extend beyond the possible dilemmas and tensions that university staff and students may face. Will the 'business' of attracting students distract universities from the business of education itself? Will the destabilisation of traditional authority relations lead academic staff to teach less in the belief or hope that students would learn more or at least love learning more? Fundamentally, will it bring about more or less education? These are questions with no easy answers and, perhaps, only time will determine the eventual winners and losers in this sea change that is taking place in the Singapore higher education landscape. What is more certain, as I hope to have demonstrated through my analysis of the two university prospectuses, is the power of discourse to both reflect and reinforce social change. As Foucault once observed, it seems that in this modern age discourse is indeed the power to be seized (Foucault 1970).

Appendix 1

ntu prospectus : 05-06 1

## Welcome to NTU, → where the world is your classroom.

At NTU, we are a hub of international connectivity, supported by state-of-the-art infrastructure. To achieve a cosmopolitan outlook, NTU embraces a complete education, navigating a vibrant, multi-cultural, open-minded and inclusive community that sees and seizes opportunities beyond the parochial.



the journey starts here . . .

Alice     Asmar     Tan Kee Hwa     Sarikuman

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1	a complete journey	28-29	school of biological sciences
2	president's message	30-31	school of materials engineering
3	dean of admissions' message	32-33	nanyang business school
4-5	new destinations	34-35	school of communication & information
6-7	attractions - global immersion programme	36-37	national institute of education
8-9	attractions - aerospace engineering	40-41	campus life - halls of residence
12-13	college of engineering	42-43	campus life - sports & facilities
14-15	school of art, design & media	44-45	campus life - dining & amenities
16-17	school of physical & mathematical sciences	48-49	nanyang scholarship
18-19	school of humanities & social sciences	50-51	liststep programme
20-21	school of mechanical & aerospace engineering	54-52	admission and financial assistance
22-23	school of civil & environmental engineering	63-64	affirmation
24-25	school of computer engineering		
26-27	school of electrical & electronic engineering		

In the new global economy, the acquisition of skills for changing jobs or entirely new jobs, is the key to maintaining employability, as the Government's Economic Review Committee's Sub-committee on Enhancing Human Capital notes.

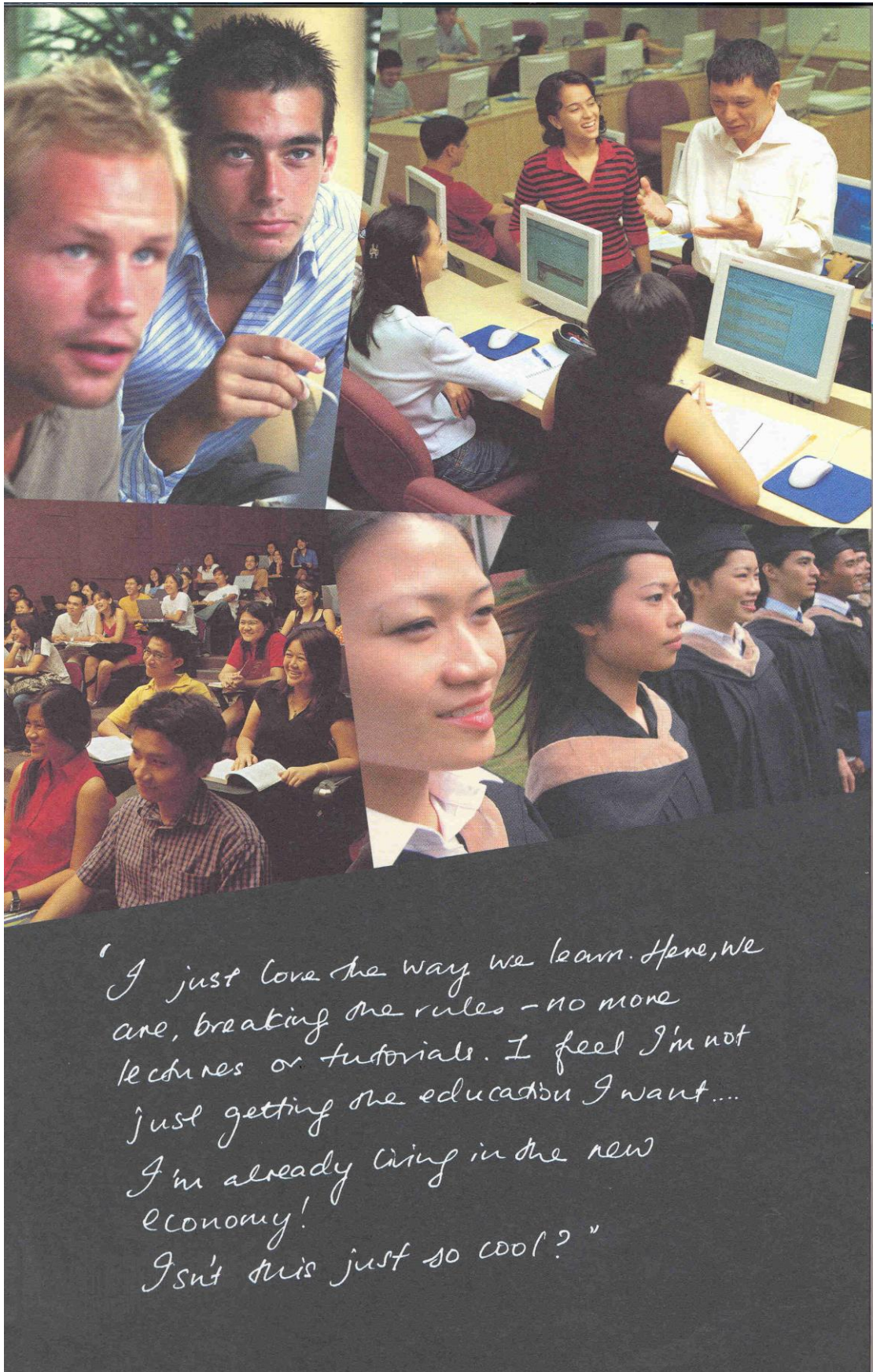
Clearly, a conventional education is not sufficient anymore. The entire learning experience has to be much more varied than before. That is why NTU provides diversity of campus life – essential and exciting at the same time. This includes colourful on-campus hostel living and a radically improved curriculum that is broad-based and flexible at the same time.

In short, NTU offers a Complete Education. The result is graduates that are market ready and relevant. Honed in them are creativity and entrepreneurship on the one hand, and integrity and interpersonal skills on the other. These are critical qualities in the new economy.

## A COMPLETE JOURNEY

A COMPLETE EDUCATION - YOUR PASSPORT TO A COMPLETE EDUCATION

## Appendix 2A



## **Appendix 2B**

creativity

Push beyond boundaries

What is this ability to think outside the box? Or to realise there is no box to begin with. It's an attitude borne of the times. It's SMU attitude.

We involve, nurture and evolve our students. Empowered, you speak up. Unafraid, you step out.

At SMU, traditional lectures and tutorials are deliberately avoided, while seminar style teaching is adopted. Classes are kept small to maximise interaction, stimulate critical exchanges and enable independent thinking. All these help sharpen communication and presentation skills, thereby honing leadership capabilities and team-building qualities.

**practical internships** give SMU personal real-world perspectives while they gain a headstart in building networks and identifying career choices. An essential part of the curriculum is 12 weeks of internship. Of this, 80 hours are dedicated to community service.

**exchange programmes** provide invaluable insights and experiences, especially when students are exposed to different cultures. Undergraduates are encouraged to fulfil a term or a year of their degree overseas, with one of the many distinguished and reputable universities who partner SMU in this exchange plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://www.nus.edu.sg/president/speeches/2005/um\\_1.htm](http://www.nus.edu.sg/president/speeches/2005/um_1.htm) [retrieved 30 December, 2005]

<sup>2</sup> Ashraf, Tan Kee Hwa and Sakkunan are recognizably Malay, Chinese and Indian names, respectively.



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