Gongfu master of business school

In many Chinese martial arts schools, pupils often make their way up academically to master formidable fighting skills. Then they descend to defend the helpless, right wrongs and uphold justice. They also pass on what they have mastered to disciples.

A generation of outstanding students, Professor Bernard Yeung, head of the NUS Business School, says these are the highest ideals these students strive for. The dean and Stephen Rady Distinguished Professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School says well-trained and socially responsible individuals who understand the world and want to change it are especially relevant in Asia.

"We need a lot of leaders in Asia which have intellectual intensity and devotion because our economic development relies on people who can identify and solve learning questions, and who push boundaries to stimuli for growth and innovations. Those people can become very good leaders who will generate generations of students who are ready to take this on," he says.

Yeung himself is the living embodiment of such an ideal. He is a leader in his time to mentoring students and faculty, and pushing them to reach their maximum potential. His contributions have gone unnoticed.

Earlier this year, Prof. Yeung, 59, received the Irwin Outstanding Educator Award from the Academy of Management in the United States which honours outstanding educators who have left deep imprints in their fields. The award, which is given to three educators each year, was previously won by three NUS professors: Ronald Chua, a leading authority on comparative teaching, and Professors Michael Porter, a leading expert on company strategy. Prof. Yeung is the first Asian - the first ever Sanksi Chamee from the US or China - and the first from an Asian institution to win the award.

"It is based on nominations but I didn’t know who nominated me," he says. "The selection committee talked to my old students and colleagues to find out what my influence was on training, research methodology and so on," says the dean who has mentored nearly 40 PhD students, many of whom now work as professors at Harvard, Columbia and Cornell.

"My students are known to have solid methodology and they practice the art of relating to others, which is very important. Academics is an accumulation of knowledge; we have to improve and improve," he says.

Recently, with New York University’s Stern School of Business, he became dean of the NUS Business School five years ago. He has a PhD from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business.

"We need to be clear about the sort of students we hope to produce. We know students who in 40 years will come and say, ‘you did this, you did that’ but what is the value they add to the students and their society?" says Yeung.

Adding value: "A job should not be just a job. It’s about what you bring to the table, what the job is about and what it can do to make yours a better company or to serve society better."

From 1979 to 1981, Yeung was an economist in the Singapore Exchange and has three adult children. His wife, who is president of the Singapore Exchange, is also proud of their children’s efforts to make sure they are not too low to be one of the highest in the world.

The NUS Business School comprises prominent leaders such as former Temasek Holdings CEO and chairman in Singapore's Exchange, Jack Hu, and group chairman of Li & Fung Limited, Mr. Yeung. Yeung is proud of his son, C.A. Yeung, former Capitaland head honcho since 2002, who also manages the wealth of other businesses.

This is important not just for our students but also for our country. People gain the fear of making big decisions; they have to face the challenges and trends.

If rankings are any indication, he has done a pretty good job since joining NUS five years ago.

Earlier this year, its double degree programmes with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Virginia ranked 15th and 14th for the Economist’s inaugural Executive Master of Business Administration rankings. The school’s Asia-Pacific Executive MBA, taught in English and Mandarin, was No. 2.

While he praised, he said it is more important that the school’s growth is sustainable. "And to do that, you must produce students who have the right personality, the vision and a mission to lead from Asia. We need business leaders who not only have the knowledge but the will to serve society."

Just like the knights present in his favourite martial arts novel.