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St Gallen holds the key to freshest ideas for the hottest issues in the world

While Davos plays host to an annual gathering of global bigwigs, St Gallen is where the VIP chew over ideas with some of the brightest young minds in the world.

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Singapore DPM Heng Swee Keat attended this year's event and spoke on preparing citizens for future challenges, as well as Asia's growth and its implications. With him is symposium chairman Dominic Barton.
PHOTO: MINISTRY OF FINANCE

WHILE the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos is the most prestigious gathering of top global thinkers, political leaders and businessmen, Switzerland is host to another unique annual gathering that promotes inter-generational conversations on key current issues with participants from around the world.

What is special about the St Gallen Symposium is that it is a student-driven initiative for inter-generational debates on key current global economic, political and social developments. The student-run annual meeting takes place annually in May at Switzerland's University of St Gallen, one of Europe's leading business universities.

"The Symposium is important because it enables a dialogue over three generations by bringing together key decision makers, thought leaders, and brilliant young minds. In 2020 the St Gallen Symposium will celebrate its 50th anniversary," says Singapore-based businessman Alexander C Melchers, a graduate of the University of St Gallen who has been associated with the event since 1992.

"The St Gallen Symposium is a not-for-profit organisation and it is organised and run by students. This makes this event different from all other similar management symposia, most notably the World Economic Forum held in Davos," he says in an interview with The Business Times.

"Recently, a prominent Singaporean told me: 'I must go to Davos, but I want to go to St Gallen'."

Mr Melchers is general manager of the C.Melchers Group of Companies in Singapore. C.Melchers GmbH & Co. is a diversified trading, development and services company established in 1806. It is headquartered in Bremen, Germany, and has offices across Asia.

When Mr Melchers was studying at the University of St Gallen, he was a member and head of the organising committee of the 22nd and the 23rd St Gallen Symposiums in 1992 and 1993. He now heads the St Gallen alumni group in Singapore. There are around 200 alumni in Singapore. For the past 20 years, he has been advising the symposium and its foundation on an honorary basis.

Singapore has had a strong relationship with the event over the past 20 years. Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Kiat was there this year, making it his first overseas trip after taking up the new post. He spoke on preparing citizens for future challenges, as well as Asia's growth and its implications.

Mr Melchers says the event's long relationship with Singapore rests on three pillars. "Student participation, or 'Leaders of Tomorrow'; business participants and financial support from the business community; and faculty presence by outstanding Singaporean leaders and representatives of the Government."

This relationship was built with the strong support of the National Youth Achievement Award Council and its executive director, James Soh, says Mr Melchers. Since 2000, almost 200 students from Singapore have qualified - through a highly competitive essay competition - to be invited for an all-expenses-paid trip to attend the St Gallen Symposium

Over 100 Singaporean business leaders have participated and joined the various delegations. Many Singapore based companies are "partners" and "benefactors" of the symposium. These contributions allow the symposium to invite the leaders of tomorrow, says Mr Melchers.

"The first Singapore Minister to represent Singapore at the St Gallen Symposium was Teo Chee Hean in 2000; then Mah Bow Tan gave the Singapore record during SARS in 2003. This was followed by two significant presentations by Minister of Finance Tharman Shanmugaratnam. One of them was in the BBC Hardtalk format and had over 700,000

views online. Following him, the 4G leaders, Ong Ye Kung, Lawrence Wong, Chan Chun Sin and Heng Swee Keat represented Singapore."

During the symposium the students have the opportunity to provide their views and the finalists are asked to defend their innovative and creative ideas in front of a large audience.

"Furthermore, the students benefit from the inspiring atmosphere and from becoming part of the global community of outstanding leaders.

"One of the most exciting events for students from Singapore is the Singapore gathering. It is the opportunity for them to build up their network and to talk to government and business representatives

"Last but not least, participating students will spend a week in Switzerland free of charge. After the event, the alumni regularly connect and meet in Singapore to continue to build on the strong idea of St Gallen, which is dialogue and liberalism."

About five years ago, Mr Soh of the NYAAC initiated the St Gallen Singapore Forum, which is a dialogue session held typically in January and leading up to the Symposium topic. This year Temasek Holdings CEO Ho Ching spoke on the topic: Capital for Purpose.

The NYAA was launched in 1992 for youths to develop into well-rounded individuals and realise their potential through three key domains built on: developing personal qualities, learning new skills and serving the community. This is to empower youth to take action, and create meaningful change within their community and the world, says Mr Soh.

"The symposium also acts as a platform for Singapore's young leaders to interact and connect with today's political and business leaders to gain their insights and to discuss global issues at large and find solutions together.

"Young leaders invited to the symposium also forms part of our NYAA leadership capacity training programme for our younger generation, to provide exposure to the highly interconnected and globalised world.

"Each May, over 250 outstanding university students from around the world selected through this process attend this programme which enables our students to interact with their counterparts from all over the world."

Mr Soh says past speakers include Christine Lagarde, then Managing Director, International Monetary Fund; and Tony Tan Keng Yam, then President of Singapore.

"What impressed the Singapore leaders is that the entire event is completely run by students from the University of St Gallen. The students selected for the organising committee take a year off from their studies to work on the symposium," says Mr Soh.

"Dialogues like these, broaden the horizons for our youths and is a good platform to expose them to the varied approaches towards solving problems. Youths get the opportunity to make new friends from all walks of life and various backgrounds, enriching their experience at the symposium, and networking with political and business leaders, learning from everyone. We hope our students return to Singapore with fresh insights and experiences to share with a wider audience."

The St Gallen Symposium started in 1969, when five students from the university saw the need to bring discussions about the future from the street to an organised setting.

"This was the beginning of the St Gallen Symposium which was founded as a response to the international student unrests of 1968," says Mr Melchers.

"Since then, the Symposium has been organised by the International Students' Committee a student initiative at the university. During the past years we welcomed more than 1,000 participants each year."

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