

Universities must adapt to changing career needs

Academics cite retraining adults, work-study schemes as ways to meet new job demands

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Universities must keep up with changing times and prepare people for possibly longer careers by helping them learn new skills throughout their lifetime.

Once institutions which educated only small numbers of people, universities today need to serve

the needs of their societies instead of being bastions of elitism.

This was the consensus among local and foreign academics and industry leaders at a conference held yesterday at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS).

The conference organised by SUSS, titled Univer-Cities, brought together some 200 participants to discuss the role of universities at a time when countries are facing

technological disruption and social issues like ageing populations.

The previous Univer-Cities, in 2016, was hosted by the University of Newcastle in Australia.

Retraining adults, work stints, online learning and rethinking the typical four-year undergraduate course are some ways universities here and abroad are trying to re-imagine higher education.

SUSS president Cheong Hee Kiat said the bulk of its students are working adults who study on a part-time basis. Of its nearly 15,000 students now enrolled, about 13,000 are in part-time programmes and

2,000 are in full-time programmes.

The university caters to a range of learners, from fresh school-leavers to working adults looking for a qualification, or who are facing job dislocation.

Tracing how universities have evolved over time, SkillsFuture Singapore chief executive Ng Cher Pong said higher education is now more widespread than in the past, and degrees today are more varied, including even applied trades such as nursing.

"Universities have the capacity to evolve, and they have evolved to keep pace with the times," he said.

He said the changes brought about by technological advances are opportunities for universities to serve unmet needs, such as by preparing individuals for multiple jobs in their lifetime, some of which may be jobs that do not exist yet.

People are having longer careers, Mr Ng added, and may need to switch careers, upgrade and learn new skills when industries are disrupted.

To that end, universities such as SUSS have started work-study programmes to allow adult learners to earn a degree while working.

SUSS has one such programme with NTUC First Campus for preschool teachers, and it is exploring offering similar courses in fields such as business analytics, biomedical engineering and social work, said Professor Cheong.

In 2017, SUSS also started an initiative allowing organisations to offer short online courses to the public about social issues, on a platform hosted by the university.

So far, nine partners, such as suicide-prevention centre Samaritans of Singapore and social service

agency Awwa, have come on board, with 15 such courses for a start.

Topics range from early childhood education and special needs, to caregiving and providing emotional support to people affected by suicide.

National University of Singapore (NUS) president Tan Eng Chye, who also spoke at the event, said his university is encouraging students to be trained in more than one discipline, and preferably in fields that are contrasting.

"We are moving towards widening the base. What we are trying to do is to really prepare our students well for a lifetime of learning," he said, adding that NUS is also placing greater emphasis on longer industry attachments.

Another recent scheme, NUS Life-long Learners or L3 for short, aims to further support alumni by opening continuing education and training courses to them. It will also help them chart their career and learning path beyond the three to four undergraduate years, he added.