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SINGAPORE: University students may be able to take on jobs and study for degrees at the same time, under a pilot co-operative programme that could kick off as early as 2017.

This change – to recognise the increasing need for students to possess both soft skills and deep technical skills for the future economy – was announced by Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung at a forum on Saturday (Jun 25).

Under the programme, students can alternate between the university campus and the company every semester. They can also be hired by the company and get an income throughout their course.

For a start, the scheme will be led by the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and UniSIM.

They will collaborate with organisations like Singtel, CapitaLand, The Ascott, Singapore Power and Standard Chartered Bank, along with Government units such as the Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA) and the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore.

"Increasingly, education is a joint effort between institutions and industry players because they recognise that deep technical skills and horizontal, essential soft skills have to be acquired at the same time. This co-operative programme is a fresh concept. The leaders in the universities and industries understand its benefits, and that it requires a far higher level of commitment by the companies compared to the internship programmes we have today," said Mr Ong.

Mr Ong also highlighted the need for universities to be diverse in expertise so they can fulfill their core mission – to impart skills, create and transmit knowledge, as well as to shape and define society.

"Our universities must aim to be a brain trust of talent and expertise across many disciplines and domains. To do so, they must have talent management systems that adopt an expansive definition of contribution and impact – one that is not narrowly defined by the number of research papers published in international journals," he said.

About 250 people attended the forum, organised by The Straits Times and Singapore Management University.

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