



From left: Singapore Management University law dean Goh Yihan and SMU president Arnoud De Meyer argued against the motion "You don't need a degree to succeed in life" at the Straits Times Education Forum yesterday. On the opposing team were OECD director for education and skills Andreas Schleicher and SkillsFuture Singapore chief executive Ng Cher Pong. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

Skills v degrees debate ends in a tie

Audience initially felt degrees not necessary for success, but is swayed by debate's end

Fabian Koh

The question of which matters more for success in life – holding a degree or mastering skills – has finally been answered, and it is a tie.

At The Straits Times Education Forum yesterday, organised in partnership with the Singapore Management University (SMU), the motion "You don't need a degree to succeed in life" was debated.

Mr Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and SkillsFuture Singapore chief executive Ng Cher Pong argued for the motion, while SMU president Arnoud De Meyer, and the university's law dean Goh Yihan stood against.

The debate, moderated by Singa-

pore Press Holdings consultant Patrick Daniel, involved the 500-strong audience voting for or against the motion in real time, according to how they were swayed as the session went on.

Made up of students, educators, parents and Straits Times readers, the audience at the SMU School of Law building voted 65.4 per cent in favour of the motion and 34.7 per cent against it at the start.

However, by the end of the session, it was 50 per cent for as well as 50 per cent against the motion.

Mr Schleicher started by singling out successful people who were university dropouts and "unsuccessful in formal education", such as inventor Thomas Edison, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Microsoft founder Bill Gates.

But Professor De Meyer pointed

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out that the group of people who are successful without a degree was extremely small, or infinitesimal, as he put it.

He added that every member on the debate panel held a degree, and questioned if they would be there if they did not.

Associate Professor Goh said the late Apple chief Steve Jobs, although a university dropout, had benefited from his time in university.

"If he had not attended that calligraphy course in university in his broad-based educational experi-

ence, we would not have proportionally spaced phones, or multiple typefaces on our Macs," he argued.

The team supporting the motion also pointed out that new jobs are appearing, and university degrees may not have sufficiently prepared graduates for them.

Mr Schleicher said skills attained at the point when the degrees were awarded may not be relevant any more.

Mr Ng noted: "We see job titles today that did not exist 10 to 15 years ago, but are now fairly commonplace, like game designers, cybersecurity specialists, data scientists and even drone operators."

He questioned if degrees should have a sell-by date, since skills are so quickly becoming obsolete.

The team arguing against the motion said that in the course of pursuing a degree, one would pick up soft social skills, and not just hard skills.

Prof Goh said a degree is "but an indication of the entire university experience". It is not just a paper quali-

fication but caps years of learning soft skills such as building one's confidence, finding one's passion and honing one's leadership abilities.

Prof De Meyer, sharing his experience of working in different countries in various roles, said the pursuit of a degree helped him in adapting to new challenges.

Mr Ng pointed out that intangible qualities such as passion and having a growth mindset are "not necessarily attributes that are acquired and certified in a degree".

In his opening address, Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez said the traditional mentality that a degree was needed to get ahead in life seemed to be undergoing a shift, due to disruptions in various sectors by entrepreneurs and technopreneurs.

"We are in this quandary – do you need a degree or do you not need a degree? We are trying to grapple with where the truth really lies.

"As with most things in life, it's probably somewhere in the middle. But exactly where in the middle? I think that's what we are here to debate today."

Mr Fernandez, who is also editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group, added that such a debate was important to highlight the need for "thinking, inquiring, sceptical minds, which are also open to the possibility of alternative views and alternative perspectives".

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