

Boosting the life-changing power of universities

Last month, Singapore Management University president Arnoud De Meyer delivered a speech on how much meaningful impact universities have on society. This is an edited version.

For decades, if not centuries, societies all over the world have assumed that universities have a positive socio-economic impact on them.

Intuitively, societies have accepted that supplying a well-educated workforce to government and business, and carrying out research that ultimately would lead to application, were important for an advanced society.

Universities often also offered significant social mobility, in particular, if they provided public or private financial support systems and an admissions policy that is needs-blind. Finally, universities are often the magnet to attract talented people as well as excellent intellectual and cultural activities, thereby creating a stimulating environment with a high quality of life.

These and other advantages created by universities were rarely challenged, but the more taxpayers had to pay for institutes of higher education, the more there were attempts to quantify these positive effects.

And indeed, the impact is positive. The correlations between the quality of the university systems and measures of socio-economic developments are positive. The 2018 report by the World Bank Group, Changing Nature Of Work, estimates that the global average private return to tertiary education is 15.8 per cent.

I can also refer to recent analysis by Times Higher Education that suggests that research quality, research, and enrolment in tertiary education, correlate quite strongly with factors such as gross national income per capita, or the United Nations human development index.

During the early 2000s, more voices were raised, in particular in the United Kingdom, questioning whether the return on the investment in higher education was

worth it, and whether the impact of university was meaningful rather than marginal.

Such questions were raised because of some negative signals. Let me just mention five of them:

- Higher education does not always lead to better jobs, and in several countries, from those in north Africa to South Korea, there is significant graduate unemployment or underemployment.

- The ideal of education as a significant tool for social mobility has often been challenged: In many countries, it is the children from the better-off families who tend to go to university.
- Governments did not always see the return on the investment in R&D in the growth of their GDP, and started asking questions about universities' true commitment to commercialisation and monetisation of research outcomes. This was particularly relevant in smaller countries that do not always have the industrial absorptive capacity to bring research results into practice.

- While the average return on investment as quoted by the World Bank was 15.8 per cent, the average hid a wide range of different situations. The real return depends, of course, on a range of factors that include the quality of the university, student composition, type of disciplines and the availability of jobs.

- And some politicians, in particular in the United States, doubted whether the public sector should actually be involved in financing research at universities. They often want to redefine the roles of the state and the markets in the



The 2018 report by the World Bank, Changing Nature Of Work, estimates that the global average private return to tertiary education is 15.8 per cent. ST FILE PHOTO

organisation of universities.

Such questions led, in the first instance in the UK, to a demand that universities should document and measure their impact.

In the 2014 REF (research evaluation framework), the UK government asked universities to document their impact through case studies.

This has led to a wealth of case studies, and also sections in the annual reports of UK and, more recently, US universities, quantifying their impact through the number of jobs created, spin-off enterprises launched, increased salaries for their graduates, growth engendered through immigration of international students, or cultural events supported.

How have we been thinking about meaningful impact?

We can easily produce a set of ap-

proximate statistics, showing the socio-economic impact of SMU. For example, if our graduates were to get \$1,000 more a month because of their degree, we create additional value of close to \$360 million for our 24,000 alumni.

Having about 80 start-ups by our graduates each year also makes a significant impact on Singapore. And through community service, our students give back to society about 270,000 hours every year.

But I am convinced that like other universities, SMU will have to reflect a lot more on how we enhance our impact on society.

A university education is more than a set of courses, it is about transforming young adults so that they can make a big difference to our society, once they get on with their jobs. I see four ways of ensuring that this happens:

- Tertiary education systems need, of course, to guarantee a minimum threshold of transferable cognitive skills. We need to teach our disciplines. But in the World Bank's Changing Nature Of Work, it is also emphasised that incorporating more general education in tertiary programmes, such as critical thinking, problem solving and communications, renders the acquisition and application of the transferable skills more effective.

- Second, in a world where we will live and work longer, formal education is no longer an activity that is limited to a particular period in your life, but should be a continuing activity. And in a world where we have unlimited access to information and knowledge, transfer of knowledge is perhaps less important than learning how to apply knowledge. We need to provide a learning environment in which our students learn to learn from project work.

Therefore, SMU has invested heavily in experiential learning, our so-called SMU-X.

- Third, universities need to provide better integration between learning, living and giving back to society. From this academic year onwards, SMU is piloting a Residential Living-and-Learning concept at our renovated Prinsep Street Residences. We aim to build a community of students for the community around us, where students co-live/work/learn together. They are also nurtured to be change agents by giving back to the Bras Basah community...

- And fourth, universities need to remain totally committed to the idea of social mobility. Last year, we created the bond-free SMU Access programme that ensures that no student who comes from a family with a per capita income of less than \$625 would miss out on an SMU undergraduate education due to the lack of financial resources.

Universities need to create an environment where junior faculty can pursue basic research in their disciplines, partially as a way to build their reputation. But I also count on senior faculty to engage in larger scale interdisciplinary research projects that address the issues we have to cope with here in Singapore. We need to come up with solutions for our ageing population. We need to find ways to protect us against cyber attacks. We need to invest in new models for retail. These are all areas where we build new research centres.

But rather than thinking about application after we have carried out the research, I would encourage faculty to invest more during the design phase of the research projects in what I would call "design for application". Let's think from the start of a research project on how its outcome can have meaningful impact on our society.

I already referred to the need for life-long learning. A little more than a year ago, SMU and other institutions of higher learning here in Singapore created units to respond to the Government's plans for continuing education, under the banner of SkillsFuture.

But I am convinced that we are still in the early stages of discovering how to create meaningful impact through adult learning programmes.

The whole university world needs to invest in having a better understanding of how adults learn, we need to carry out a more systematic diagnosis of the specific needs and constraints faced by adults, and we need to devise flexible delivery models that fit well with adult lifestyles...

And finally, I hope to see more international students on our campus, either as full-time students or for an exchange programme... Having seen the dynamism and commitment to Singapore by our alumni in their associations in Indonesia, Myanmar, Hong Kong, several cities in China, Manila, and so on, I am convinced that SMU's meaningful impact through our international alumni goes far beyond Singapore.