

ScienceFaces

Don lauded for using research to help public

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Psychologist David Chan cannot imagine working in a university without applying his theories to benefit the public.

As an industrial and organisational (I-O) psychologist, Professor Chan, 54, uses his understanding of human behaviour to boost the effectiveness of organisations, improve employees' well-being and analyse policies and public opinion.

"Since we are addressing organisations and people's lives, I personally think it is quite strange and difficult to just stay in our ivory towers and do research," said the director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University.

"If you truly understand the nature of this discipline and why it exists, you will want to do research to solve problems in the real world."

On top of publishing in top psychology journals and writing several books, Prof Chan is also a member of a number of councils, such as the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) and the Diabetes Prevention and Care Taskforce.

With the NCPG, he uses findings from his own research and existing studies to find out how gamblers struggle with self-control and decision-making. His insights are used to improve existing policies on problem gambling prevention and public education.

His commitment to creating knowledge and using it to shape policies and workplace practices earned him the inaugural Scientist-Practitioner Presidential Recognition award from the US-based Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology on April 4.

This is the first award to recognise a psychologist who contributes

equally to both research and practice in the field of I-O psychology.

"I'm glad that this award was created because it sends the signal that it is important for us to start living the scientist-practitioner model. The award is a recognition that science and practice are not seen as separate and are definitely not opposing," said Prof Chan.

He also noted that the structure of many research-based universities here and abroad forces faculty members to focus solely on publishing in top journals, which prevents many from teaching well and applying their knowledge to the real world. The main roles of professors in universities are to create, disseminate and apply knowledge, he said.

"I can understand if professors are concerned about time, but I would argue that good researchers will want to teach passionately and effectively, and also disseminate knowledge to the public."

University management and policymakers who have control over funding and resources in universities and research institutes must ensure that the system encourages professors to be more integrative, added Prof Chan.

Balancing research and psychology practice comes naturally to Prof Chan because he did not start off as an academic. He was a police officer for nine years, dealing with cases from gang fights to domestic abuse before embarking on graduate studies in 1993.

"What I value from my stint as a police officer is (that) I started off in the real world, dealing with people and solving problems. That has always been my meaning in life. I can't imagine doing research with no practical application. At the same time, I can't imagine giving consulting advice without the research."

As a local researcher, Prof Chan



Professor David Chan's commitment to creating knowledge and using it to shape policies and workplace practices earned him the inaugural Scientist-Practitioner Presidential Recognition award this month. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

has an innate interest in the country and how he can use his expertise to contribute to public policy.

"Being a scientist-practitioner becomes natural because I am also a citizen and have a stake in the country. I will be interested in the country's issues."

I-O psychology took off in World War I when psychologists were hired to select personnel for specific jobs within the military, and to test the emotional and intellectual abilities of soldiers.

Prof Chan's works have been cited more than 10,000 times in academic studies, and in 2017, he was the first scientist in the world to be made a fellow in all six international organisations for psychologists. His current research interest lies in looking at how people adapt to changes in technology, society and politics.

He has written about what makes political leaders effective. When a decision or policy lacks transparency, citizens feel that they do not have a say in decisions that affect them, he said. "Before galvanising citizens to work towards a goal or explaining why they need to change their mindsets, politicians should first address the citizens' concerns about the policymaking process."

In his field, about half of the post-graduates will go into academia while the other half will become consultants in companies, Prof Chan observed.

In other fields of psychology such as cognitive or social psychology, close to 90 per cent of doctorate holders will remain in universities and research institutions.

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