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CHATROOM | ARNOUD DE MEYER

More to university than getting a degree

It's the 'learning to learn' system that matters, not that piece of paper

DO YOU need a university degree for a good career?

This has been hotly debated in recent weeks after four ministers – Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan, Acting Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing and Education Minister Heng Swee Keat – spoke on similar themes of how academic qualifications are not a sure ticket to success.

Indeed, Asia "is a bit hung up on that piece of paper", Singapore Management University (SMU) president Arnaud De Meyer tells Insight. A degree helps get a better salary, but it is the experience of learning that is more important in today's age, says Professor De Meyer, who has held top posts at Insead and Cambridge University's Judge Business School.

He also discusses last year's announcement of a 3,000-strong increase in student numbers by 2020, noting that not everybody needs to go to university and there are good jobs that do not require a degree.

■ *What is your take on the recent debate?*

Having a good degree helps you to find a better job and a higher salary. It also offers you broader options. If you go for a diploma, usually you're quite specialised.

But there are successful people with no degree, such as (late Apple chief executive officer) Steve Jobs and (Facebook CEO) Mark Zuckerberg.

Even when the PM announced last year that 40 per cent of each cohort will go to university by 2020 (up from 27 per cent now), that still means that 60 per cent will not go to university.

If you look at other advanced countries like the Scandinavian countries or Britain, 40 per cent is in the upper limit.

University degrees offer three things as opposed to a diploma. First, you get your specialisation, your skills you build up.

Second, we've organised the SMU education (so) it is broad. Students have a lot of flexibility. They can have a second major, second degree or electives.

The third characteristic is "learning to learn". What you learn today may be obsolete five years from now. You need to constantly learn new things. That is also what university education



SMU's Professor Arnaud De Meyer sees universities as providing a system of learning for students so that they may be able to keep improving, but he also believes that not everyone needs to go to university as there are good jobs that do not require degrees. PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

provides – a system of learning.

■ *The ministers emphasised the value of work experience and entrepreneurship. Can't these be obtained both in and out of university?*

I agree with what Mr Khaw said – that it is not about the piece of paper you can hang on your wall but about real experience and the components of your education.

It is about being able to immediately start working when you get a job. That is why we believe in internships and have made it com-

pulsory for every student to do an internship. I also believe in international exposure and holistic education – these prepare people better for a job in the real world.

That's what universities need to do more in the future – mix conceptual and theoretical learning with practical exposure.

Asia as a whole is a bit hung up on that piece of paper. It's the experience of learning that is more important. A university is both about skills and things like interactions and discussions with each other, the creativity of working

day and night on projects, going out, making new friends.

It is also true that we need to become more entrepreneurial, not necessarily setting up a business but in the way we act within the company. Our Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship has 55 companies created by our students. They are all small and some of them will fail, I fear, but you will see that our students have that entrepreneurial attitude.

■ *How do the recent statements by the ministers sit with the*

announcement last year that the Government will offer 3,000 more university places by 2020?

I don't see too much contradiction because they are creating more places.

I see three things happening here. One, there was this expectation that everybody will go to university in the end. Maybe some will have that chance.

But we have to be realistic. It's not necessary that everybody goes. There are really interesting and good jobs that don't require a university degree and they may be

a better fit for people with more practical or artistic aptitudes. We all have different capabilities and should recognise that not everybody will have to go to university.

The second point is, we know from the European experience that if you have too many students going to university, you get graduate unemployment. So underlying the messages from the ministers is, be careful, a degree is no guarantee for a job.

Third, be careful in choosing a line of study. Choose a broad area where there will be demand.

■ *Polytechnic graduates are concerned that in sectors where they compete with university graduates for jobs, starting pay and job progression will differ.*

At polytechnics, you get very good people with much more practical skills who can hit the ground running. They start working at 19 for women or 21 for the men, and you could argue that they have four more years of earning money than a university graduate.

University graduates also have to pay their tuition fees. Somehow the market recognises the difference in investments that students have made.

■ *How has the value of a university degree changed in Singapore?*

Recruiters ask for more than skills from your studies. They are looking for communication skills and global exposure. They expect us to groom students to be more job-ready.

■ *How can universities ensure both that their education remains accessible while graduates are employable?*

(By) making sure our students are employable. We have to be realistic. Just because I got a degree in economics today doesn't mean it will be valid 10 years later. That's why we tell students to think about a broad set of capabilities and skills and to keep improving.

We also work closely with the Education and Manpower ministries to get a feel for where Singapore is going. We invest in helping our students understand the job market, listen to the market's needs and adjust our curriculum.

For instance, we now see fewer jobs in finance. Arts and cultural management is growing – (Korean rapper) Psy is here this weekend – so we launched a second major in that field.

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