

# As education evolves, so must universities



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**S**INGAPORE'S fifth and sixth universities, the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (UniSIM), recently released details of the new degrees that they will launch next year.

SIT, set up in 2009, partners overseas universities such as the Technical University of Munich and Glasgow University to offer niche degrees to polytechnic graduates. From next year, it will offer its own three degrees in infrastructure engineering, software engineering and accountancy.

UniSIM, which has been running part-time degrees for working adults since 2005, will add three full-time degrees from next year. These are in marketing, finance and accountancy.

To get their students job-ready, both universities will adopt an applied hands-on approach to teaching and learning and require their students to go on intensive work attachments.

Particularly striking is the flexibility that UniSIM will allow its students to have to customise their university education to suit their learning interests and needs.

The pioneer batch of 200 entering next year can crunch a four-year course into three years

by taking more modules during a semester and attending evening classes originally targeted at adults.

And if students land a job during their course, or want to take on more work attachment stints, they have the option of switching to part-time studies and taking up to six years to earn their degree.

UniSIM president Cheong Hee Kiat explains such flexibility was allowed because the university realised that in the future the boundaries between part-time and full-time and work and study will not be clear-cut.

Indeed, as educational opportunities have exploded in the United States with new online learning options, many students are abandoning the traditional four-year route for a more non-linear path through education. American higher education expert Clifford Adelman has named the new approach "a swirl".

On top of the courses they take up at college, students are signing up for classes from alternative providers such as Coursera, which offer free massive open online courses, called Moocs for short. Many are also taking up certification courses such as Codecademy to learn how to programme software applications or Web design.

Some extend their study period to go on student exchanges overseas that will expose them to different cultures and learning experiences. Some also seize the opportunity to go on several work stints, thus enabling them to try out different jobs before joining the workforce. Then there are those who want to combine their

degree studies with stints in research and entrepreneurship.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Centre, which tracks student movements in the US, found that one-third of students transfer from one college to another before earning a degree. More than a quarter of such transfers cross state lines.

But despite the substantial number of students "swirling" through higher education, the overwhelming majority of American universities have stuck to their four-year degree route.

In fact, the first public university to offer a flexible option, starting just a month ago, was the University of Wisconsin. Under its UW Flexible Option scheme, students can earn college credits by demonstrating knowledge they have acquired through coursework, on-the-job training and other learning experiences.

In Singapore, transfers between colleges are unheard of. But officials at the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University report that some of their students are taking a gap year. They do this in order to set up a business or to extend their work or research attachments.

Indeed the new generation of students around the world is used to mixing and matching things to suit its tastes. Students don't buy whole albums of songs, for example. Instead, they pick and choose to create their own playlists.

The problem is that most universities - even in America - are designed for students looking for

a traditional four-year route.

This has led to upstarts such as San-Francisco based Degreed which, according to its website, aims to "jailbreak" the degree by providing an online service that tracks, scores and validates all of a student's educational experiences.

In a recent media interview, Degreed chief David Blake said the economic crises in the US and the huge surge in high-quality, low-cost, online courses have left many questioning the value of the traditional college route.

Indeed, many employers and job recruiters in the US and Singapore are of the view that the traditional one-off, four-year degree route to prepare students for work will not be sufficient to train students for the future workplace, where more and more careers will be disrupted by technological advances.

Many feel that there must be continual lifelong learning interspersed with work.

Employers also welcome the mix-and-match approach, especially when it includes certification for skills they will require in their workers. They are also keen on students who have done substantive work attachments as they tend to be more able to hit the ground running.

During much of the 20th century, most workers held two or three jobs during their lifetimes. However, today's workers are predicted to hold more than 10 jobs before they reach the age of 40.

To be employable, workers will constantly have to reinvent themselves to stay relevant, which



UniSIM students who land a job during their course or want to take on more work attachments can switch to part-time studies. Such flexibility is allowed as the boundaries between full-time and part-time and work and study will be blurred in the future, says UniSIM president Cheong Hee Kiat. ST FILE PHOTO

means taking up courses to re-learn and re-skill.

This also calls for a change in the role of universities.

On top of their undergraduate and postgraduate courses, universities should provide continuing education, guiding students through their learning journey by helping them assess, choose and certify multiple learning paths.

Diverse learning options may be valuable, but they need to be more than a collection of courses.

That's where lecturers can play a useful role in becoming academic coaches, helping students construct an educational plan that is coherent and has both breadth and depth.

Universities, especially those with gold-plated names, tend to cling on to their history and tradition. But to stay relevant, they have to move with the times and create and innovate in higher education.

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