



SMU president Lily Kong hopes to inculcate in students the habit of interspersing learning with work throughout their lives, even before they start on their degree studies. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

About Lily Kong

Professor Lily Kong is Singapore Management University's fifth president, and the first Singaporean to lead the 20-year-old university.

Prof Kong, 55, is also the first Singapore woman to head a university in Singapore.

She was previously provost of SMU; vice-provost and vice-president at the National University of Singapore (in various portfolios) and executive vice-president (Academic) of Yale-NUS College.

Prof Kong is internationally known for her research on social and cultural change in Asian cities, focusing on a range of issues, from religion, cultural policy and creative economy, urban heritage and conservation, to smart cities.

An award-winning researcher and teacher, she has received five international fellowship awards and has also won the Association of American Geographers Robert Stoddard Award for Distinguished Service (Geography of Religion and Belief Systems).

She was conferred the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2006.

ST-SMU Reimagining Universities

SMU wants students to 'interrupt' studies

In this second of a four-part series on reimagining universities, senior education correspondent Sandra Davie talks to Singapore Management University president Lily Kong

When the Singapore Management University (SMU) was set up in 2000, it was the upstart in the higher education landscape.

Unlike the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, which admitted students based on examination results, SMU used a broad range of criteria, including interviews and reflective essays to select students.

Another change it instituted right from the start - awarding marks for participation in class. It forced a behavioural change in its students.

Four years later, employers receiving SMU's first batch of undergraduates noted they were more outspoken and articulate than their peers from the other universities.

SMU president Lily Kong said the university is ready to innovate and lead change in the university sector again.

The changes will not be to differentiate itself from the others, but because of the vast and sweeping changes in work trends which demand that universities inculcate the habit of interspersing learning with work throughout their students' lives.

SMU wants to start inculcating the habit even before its students start on their degree studies.

Prof Kong said: "We want to press home the point among school leavers that there is value in seeking other experiences, be it work, doing a start-up or undertaking community service, before starting on university studies and even during their studies."

"Front-loading all of their university education before starting on their careers may not necessarily be good for everyone."

"But right now, very few school leavers want to take a gap year to expose themselves to other experiences before starting on undergrad-

uate studies." She revealed that university officials are considering various options to encourage this.

"We are looking at how we can assess and make these other experiences count for admissions to SMU. For example, if someone has worked for a year or two and gained from that experience, how can we make that count?"

She elaborated on how SMU hopes to lead the change in admissions and other aspects of university education.

Q The vast majority of students still want to go to university immediately after A levels or diploma studies. How can they be persuaded not to "front-load" their education?

A This is the prevailing mindset because students worry that they will lose momentum. Or they feel that they are going to lose out if they wait a year or two to get a place.

One way of persuading them is for universities to put in place certain policies which show that going out to work or taking some time out to travel would help them with their personal and intellectual growth.

We should consider the value of students' other experiences, achievements, skill sets picked up at work before they head to university.

Though this may seem to be a difficult thing to do, it is important that we find ways of being able to make those assessments.

If we say employers are not looking for the right thing when they focus on qualifications, then we should apply that to ourselves as universities. If we're not looking for the right thing, behaviour will not change.

Q Can you elaborate on how you will

assess non-academic experiences, including work?

A We don't expect someone who's 18 and worked for two years to change the world. But we would expect they would demonstrate certain qualities of resilience, of age-appropriate innovation, creativity and adaptability.

And, if you have made that transition and been successful, it tells me something about you, your adaptability, resilience and ability to learn in a vastly different context. And that's the sort of student that I surely want.

Q Do you have a time frame in mind for the new admissions criteria that will take into account attributes from non-academic experiences?

A It will not happen overnight. It will take time and needs testing.

We must keep in mind how important the opportunity of a university education is to students and parents. There must be a sense of evenhandedness and fairness in the new criteria.

Q Do you think students see the value of combining work with study?

A Yes. In the same spirit of offering different pathways, we offer students various opportunities to combine work with study.

First, we have SMU-X courses, where students take on real projects with organisations or companies and help to find solutions. Though we intend every student to get to do one SMU-X course, we actually have some who do up to six. Students like getting a taste of different industries and companies, and a sense of what they would truly be interested in.

Second, all students are required to complete at least one 10-week internship before graduation. On average, our students complete be-

THE STRAITS TIMES EDUCATION FORUM 2020

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SMU SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

ABOUT THE FORUM

The Straits Times Education Forum on Reimagining Universities is supported by the Singapore Management University.

WHEN: Feb 15, Saturday, 10am to noon

WHERE: Singapore Management University School of Law Building, Basement 1 SMU Hall

COST: Free for ST readers

ONLINE REGISTRATION: <https://str.sg/JShn>

Limited seats available.

Q In what ways can industry and academia work more closely together?

A Consulting industry and getting their endorsement for new programmes is par for the course. What we need is for academia and industry to come together on curating and delivering courses.

We see this in our continuing education for working adults at our SMU Academy.

The Academy offers 400 courses and works with a range of industry partners which include Deloitte, KPMG, Alibaba and Accenture. Last year, we trained nearly 20,000 participants. We should see more of this close collaboration between academia and industry in the undergraduate space as well.

To further strengthen our partnerships with industry, we could, for example, have more visiting fellows from industry doing teaching stints.

Similarly, we should send out more of our academics to do stints in industry.

Q SMU is celebrating its 20th year this year. How do you hope it will continue to contribute to the higher education landscape?

A It is an opportune time to celebrate the university's collective heritage and, importantly, the values that underpin us - of innovation, of breaking new ground, of engagement with and giving back to the community.

My hope is for SMU to continue to flourish and innovate in the higher education landscape, creating new research and knowledge that contribute to developing the best talents for Singapore and make meaningful impact on economy, society and polity.

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BEYONDACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

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SMU PRESIDENT LILY KONG



At SMU, we believe that the drive for ongoing self-development is what will ensure relevance and value in an ever-changing world. We draw from current global and industry perspectives to ensure our learners can compete internationally, capitalise on opportunities, and make a positive impact on tomorrow.

Imagine a better world with us.

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