

ST-SMU Reimagining Universities

Universities must make 'audacious' changes or lose their relevance

In this final part of the series on Reimagining Universities, Senior Education Correspondent Sandra Davie talks to Hamoon Ekhtiari, who projects into the future on work and education

THE STRAITS TIMES
EDUCATION FORUM 2020



FORUM POSTPONED

In the light of the current coronavirus situation in Singapore and based on the latest advisories received, The Straits Times Education Forum on Reimagining Universities will be postponed. The forum slated for this Saturday at the Singapore Management University (SMU) School of Law already had more than 500 sign-ups, including students and educators from junior colleges and polytechnics. Education Minister Ong Ye Kung was to deliver the keynote address for the event. The Straits Times and its partner for the event, SMU, said the decision to postpone the event for now was taken given the current spread of the coronavirus.

Singapore moved its disease outbreak response up a level to code orange last Friday as the coronavirus spread further within the country, with new cases of unknown origin announced. These included a junior college teacher. The Ministry of Education introduced new measures for schools, including the suspension of inter-school and external activities until the end of the March school holidays. These include the National School Games, learning journeys and camps. Schools will continue with earlier implemented measures, such as classroom-based assemblies, school-based co-curricular activities in smaller groups and staggered recesses. The Straits Times and SMU urge those who have signed up for the forum to register again for a new date is set.

Universities have no choice but to reimagine and reinvent themselves, if they do not want to be overwhelmed by the winds of change, says Mr Hamoon Ekhtiari. The founder of Toronto-based Audacious Futures, a consultancy that forecasts future trends and comes up with solutions, says universities and policymakers have to be bold and even "audacious" in how they respond to the sweeping changes in how students learn and how they will work. He foresees a future where there will be a more varied and larger higher education ecosystem that students will learn from. This higher education landscape, as he sees it, will have to offer different pathways and non-traditional options, as well as include alternative learning providers such as online or virtual universities, bootcamp-like courses, on-the-job training and apprenticeship programmes.

"I see the future higher education ecosystem valuing the learning that happens in many different environments and allowing for seamless transitions between learning, work and life," he said. Mr Ekhtiari said university administrators and policymakers have to address three crucial gaps in the higher education system - in terms of access, quality and readiness. The access gap is about who gets the opportunity to participate in higher education.

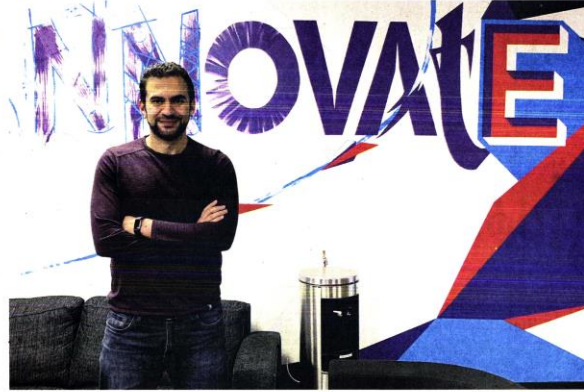
Said Mr Ekhtiari: "We need to look at the barriers for some people, from tuition fees and other costs, to whether the admission system measures the wrong things and advantages certain groups over others." The quality gap refers to whether a university education really upgrades the skills and knowledge of students.

Mr Ekhtiari said: "There are a number of studies that show that four years of education do not significantly improve on skills that matter most - including skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. Many higher education institutions have become good selection machines through their admissions office, but hardly move the needle for students over the time they are with them."

The readiness gap is about the employability of students when they graduate. According to him, universities need to address the complaints of skills mismatch, where employers say students are not ready for what the market needs and do not have the skills required for a job.

He goes further into the issues that need to be addressed:

Q Do you think universities are stuck in the past and need to change if they want to be relevant?
A If you look at the 30,000 feet level, then yes, our universities seem to be stuck in the past. The majority of them have not shifted from



Mr Hamoon Ekhtiari, founder of Toronto-based consultancy Audacious Futures, says universities seem to be stuck in the past, while the most forward-looking ones will aim to become a lifelong learning concierge, providing students with personalised advice, learning, support and networks customised to each stage of their journey over a 40- to 60-year period. ST PHOTO: SANDRA DAVIE

About Hamoon Ekhtiari

Mr Hamoon Ekhtiari is no stranger to embracing change, having worked in diverse fields. Upon graduating from the University of Waterloo in Canada, he worked at professional services firm Deloitte as a management consultant, built and raised US\$1 million (S\$1.4 million) for a social enterprise from the ground up, and became founding director of Studio Y at Toronto's MaRS Discovery District, one of the world's

largest urban innovation hubs. After that, he joined Canadian national telecommunications company Telus as director of strategy and innovation, making the leap into entrepreneurship. His company, Audacious Futures, partners executives and organisations to reimagine the future and bring bold ideas and breakthrough innovations to life. Its projects range from the future of work and education, to

the future of technology and humanity, to the future of philanthropy and government. Its latest venture, FutureFit AI, is a "GPS for your career" that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to help enterprises and governments upskill people for future jobs. It has been selected by the US Department of Education as a winning innovation. It also won a US\$1 million prize in the TD Ready Challenge by

North American bank TD, and was selected by Google AI as a global finalist among 2,600 applicants. Mr Ekhtiari is also a member of The Governor General's Canadian Leadership Conference, a recipient of the University of Waterloo's Alumni Achievement Medal, and a Canada Millennium Scholar. He is passionate about unlocking the potential of people, organisations and societies to reimagine and build the future.

the four-year degree route or the lecture-and-tutorial system. But if you look at what's happening on the ground, I am much more encouraged.

There are institutions and leaders of higher education who are radically rethinking what is possible in higher education. Take Universidad TecMilenio in Monterrey, Mexico. They have addressed the question of how they can enable their graduates to live a great life and succeed in the economy. TecMilenio's vision is to train people with a life purpose and the skills to achieve it. Its institutional values are innovation, human sense, teamwork, global vision and integrity.

Another example is the Western Governors University, which the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supports. It offers online degrees, but they are low-cost and based on competency-based progression, not class time or credit hours.

There are many other examples like these cropping up. So it gives me hope.

Q Which aspects of higher education need to be urgently reviewed and revamped?

A Universities have to innovate, and I mean truly innovate, not just

tweak at the edges, which is what most of them do. They must be prepared to question even the basics.

Universities have to relook the modes of learning and assessment: The four-year degree route, as opposed to a lifetime membership where you keep going back to learn new things and upskill yourself; a credit- or hour-based model for graduation requirements, as opposed to a competency-based model which measures learning through demonstrated proficiency to enable students to shorten or lengthen the time necessary to complete a degree.

Q Increasingly, Singapore universities are encouraging, even requiring, their students to do internships and work attachments. They are offering degree programmes where you alternate between semesters of work and study. What is your opinion on this?

A I am an alumnus of the University of Waterloo in Canada, which is famous for its co-op programme where students alternate between semesters of work and study.

I found it incredibly, personally, valuable. There are many universities offering "co-op-like programmes" but

it's important that it is a quality co-op. By that, I mean it has to be a structured programme, where students gain real work experience and they get to solve real-world problems.

When it is done well, there is nothing like it to prepare you for the world of work, where you have to meet daily deadlines and respond to 50 e-mails coming through your inbox at the same time. You learn to prioritise.

It's also really powerful when you see other people doing great work.

Q In the future, what should ideally be the role of universities?

A The most forward-looking universities will aim to become your lifelong learning concierge - a one-stop shop where they focus on providing you with personalised advice, learning, support and networks customised to the stage of your journey over a 40- to 60-year period.

Q Singapore has stepped up education and career counselling in schools and tertiary institutions. How is such counselling best done?

A In this increasingly AI- and automation-driven world, there are many different forecasts and debates on how many jobs will be

created or destroyed. But there is one certainty we should all focus on: the number, frequency and intensity of job and career transitions will certainly grow in this increasingly uncertain and unpredictable new world of work.

And yet, most of our institutions now are not set up to support people through such transitions. In this new world, career guidance, advice and counselling become critical throughout life.

This requires investment on two fronts: There must be access to high-quality career coaches as well as good tools based on data and technology to provide personalised guidance and advice.

The latter is what my staff and I are focused on at FutureFit AI - using AI to build "the Google Maps for the future of work and learning."

Imagine a GPS (Global Positioning System) for your career that gives you the capacity to discover your talents and skills, "locates" where you are starting from, recommends "destination" jobs and careers, and maps "pathways" to help you go from A to B.

That's what is needed in education and career counselling. sandra@sph.com.sg

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