



ThinkingAloud

Fancy universities as your lifelong learning concierge?

Higher education needs to become a lot more personalised and flexible to meet needs of students and workers



Lydia Lim

I was to have moderated The Straits Times education forum two weeks ago but the event has been postponed because of the ongoing coronavirus outbreak. Still, the theme of the forum has been

playing in my head: Reimagining Universities.

The question I ask myself, and which I also plan to pose to the panellists when the forum does take place, is this: What would success look like? In other words, what would count as a university that has been well and truly reimagined?

I received an exciting answer in a recent story by The Straits Times' senior education correspondent Sandra Davie.

She had flown to Toronto to interview entrepreneur Hamoon Ekhtiari, who is slated to be one of the forum's four panellists, the other three being Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, Singapore Management University (SMU) president Lily Kong and Ms Davie.

The forum will be held later this year when the Covid-19 situation clears up, so do sign up when a new date has been confirmed.

Mr Ekhtiari's company, Audacious Futures, partners executives and organisations to reimagine the future and bring bold ideas and breakthrough innovations to life.

When asked by Ms Davie what aspects of higher education need to be urgently reviewed and revamped, he replied: "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".

PERSONALISED EXPERIENCE

That answer stirs my imagination, as it sums up the qualities of what I consider to be an ideal learning experience: personalised, customised to life stage and lifelong.

Why personalise learning?

Because no two human beings are alike. That may sound like stating the obvious but the uniqueness of each person is often sacrificed for the sake of efficiency, even in education. That practice is so widespread, many have stopped questioning it.

There may have been good reasons to trade personalisation for efficiency when Singapore was at an earlier stage of economic development, and the task at hand was to quickly educate as many people as possible in the basic skills needed to function and contribute to society, such as reading, writing, problem solving with numbers, etc. But Singapore is long past that stage.

Today, the urgent task in education extends beyond the basics. It is to equip people to thrive in an economy and environment seen as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (Vuca).

That has big implications for schools and institutes of higher learning, as Mr Ekhtiari made clear.

"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 STUDY OF ONESELF

We need in essence to recover an ancient practice of scholars past who prized and privileged the

study of oneself. And to combine this practice with new tools made possible by technology, so that the benefits of customisation can reach many more people than they did.

We need to do this because understanding ourselves and our unique gifts and motivation is what will help each of us to thrive in a Vuca world marked by frequent job transitions. For it is only when we understand ourselves that we can begin to seek our own direction in a fast-changing landscape of few familiar landmarks and many shifting paths.

"Giftedness is the way we are by nature. It's what makes us," writes Mr Arthur F. Miller Jr in his book *The Power Of Uniqueness: How To Become Who You Really Are*. "It's the way we were designed to function, and therefore the way we actually do function best and with the greatest delight. It includes what we do well and are motivated to accomplish... Giftedness fits us for certain tasks. In fact, when we function according to our giftedness, the work almost doesn't seem like work; it's more like fun."

Mr Miller was a corporate consultant who focused on people management. He devised a way to map each person's motivational design and used that to help them and their organisations understand what roles would fit them, and why.

In his book, he also writes that "the job of the schools (ideally) is to honour the person and prepare him to use his giftedness in society. That makes the individual himself the most important part of the curriculum. Indeed, of all the subjects a student is asked to study, nothing is more important than the study of himself, nothing".

STUDIES INTERRUPTED
What's needed in this process of self study is time and space to explore, as Professor Lily Kong well understands. That is why she and her team at SMU encourage students to "interrupt their studies" by interspersing learning with work throughout their lives. And SMU wants to start inculcating the habit even before its students start on their degree studies.

"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," the SMU president said in an interview.

"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 undergraduate studies."

SMU is looking at how to assess and make these other experiences count in admissions to the university, she said.

On his part, Mr Ekhtiari is working with his team at FutureFit AI on using artificial intelligence 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." The challenge for the rest of us is to learn to embrace these new ways of thinking about university education and career transitions.

To find out more, come join us for The Straits Times education forum on Reimagining Universities, taking place later this year.

lydia@sph.com.sg