

ST-SMU Reimagining Universities



Professor Lily Kong, president of Singapore Management University, predicts that post-coronavirus pandemic, universities will mount more hybrid courses, with some parts taught online. But she maintains that most courses will be conducted face to face. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

First Singaporean at helm of SMU

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 including religion, cultural policy, creative economy, urban heritage and conservation, as well as smart cities. An award-winning researcher and teacher, she has received five international fellowship awards and 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.

# How the pandemic will change universities

But she maintains that most courses will be conducted face to face. She stresses that education is still a social process. "The best learning happens in the classroom - when students exchange views, debate, argue their point of view and collaborate with others in real-world projects," she says, before giving her take on rethinking higher education, post-Covid-19.

**Q** You mentioned the advantages of going online, yet you do not buy into the predictions that post-pandemic, there will be much higher adoption of online learning, that universities will partner tech companies and the vast majority of students will attend university online. Why don't you think that will happen?

**A** Two years ago, the SMU Blue Ribbon Commission for Undergraduate Education deliberated on the question: What is the role of the university in this world of massive open online courses and where students can access information easily?

Students may want more online learning, but they don't want talking heads. They are looking for interaction with their instructors and peers, they are looking for the cut and thrust of debate and real-time discussion. The philosophy with regard to online learning that we articulated then is absolutely what we want to continue with.

The first part is to recognise the student as an individual with personal and individual learning needs, and we should thus use technology to enhance personalised learning.

Second, students are also social beings, and they learn through interaction and collaboration and working together. And so technology must be used in such a way that it enhances interaction, not take away from it.

Third, part of our mission is to help students realise that they can have meaningful impact on the community.

So how can they learn to use technology in their projects, in developing research or prototypes that benefit the community?

**Q** SMU had to hold its open house, information sessions and admission exercise online? How did that affect this year's admissions?

**A** Admissions is one area where going online worked well for us. So well that we will be welcoming a record number of 2,300 freshmen this year. Our yield rate - acceptance rate to offer of places - went up this year to 50 per cent.

We held our open house online, where we shared information on courses, the admission process and what we are looking for in students.

In previous years, we had about 12,000 students attending the open house held over two days. This time, online, we had 20,000 attending - and they sought detailed information on courses and campus life.

Shortlisted candidates are put through individual or group interviews. This year we interviewed them online and to our pleasant surprise it worked well. These students, being Gen Z, are comfortable with expressing themselves online.

So, next year, we are planning to use the online medium more.

**Q** Your university has made overseas exposure a graduation requirement. Is SMU rethinking this, in the light of the experience this year where you had to bring back your students?

**A** We had to recall students like all other universities when the coronavirus infection rates started to rise.

We had more than 800 students out in different parts of the world, on exchange programmes, study missions, community service, internships and entrepreneurship immersion. Overseas stints remain valuable and we will find ways of giving students the global exposure.

At a most basic level, we might develop an "internationalisation-at-home" programme, so that there is international exposure in some form when students cannot travel.

This allows students to still learn about other peoples, cultures, languages, business environments, and so forth through a programme.

For example, we might organise an Indonesian festival one month

and you can have related movie screenings, attend book readings and invite the ambassador or entrepreneurs operating there to share insights.

So you can learn about those places through a carefully curated programme, and when the circumstances allow, you then travel armed with a better appreciation of the destination. But we also recognise that this approach does not replace actual overseas experience.

We could also work with universities in other countries to co-curate courses together. The instructors could deliver interactive classes together, and engage their students from both universities in discussions and projects.

We have asked ourselves what happens if another pandemic happens - how do we ensure the safety of our students who are overseas?

One idea is to have our intended overseas centres play a bigger role in curating programmes and providing on-the-ground presence to oversee the safety and well-being of our students.

**Q** What about university rankings? In the last few weeks, two rankings were released despite calls by university administrators to do away with them, or at least pause them for now as universities focus their efforts on fighting the pandemic.

**A** University rankings have a role to play as they highlight to us how we're performing on various criteria. However, the criteria used becomes very important.

Those undertaking rankings have a moral responsibility to ensure that rankings are pushing institutions in directions that are good for society. Rankings should relate to what is important to society. For example, Covid-19 has drawn particular attention to the more vulnerable in society.

Universities are offering help to certain segments of their student population, those who are struggling because they lost their part-time work, or their parents lost their jobs. Should rankings reflect

the good work that might be done in these aspects?

Do universities enable social mobility? Washington Monthly produces an annual ranking for United States universities, and incorporates this as a measure.

On whether we should pause rankings for now, I agree with Dr Holden Thorp, former chancellor of the University of North Carolina, who said that "if you paused and restarted it, it would be easier to make a big change to the formula that looks more at what universities do for students across a wide range of incomes and identities. So it is not pausing so that you return to it later, but pausing to think about what matters".

Students and parents ask me about SMU lagging far behind the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University in some rankings.

In the QS rankings - SMU does well when ranked with the specialist universities. Over the past years, SMU was ranked around 10th or 11th when compared with others like LSE (London School of Economics) and Science Po Paris. However if all 1,002 comprehensive, focused and specialist universities are ranked together, regardless of classification, remit or responsibility, as in the case of QS world rankings, then we don't do so well.

It is comparing apples with oranges. And this might not be immediately apparent to someone who takes the rankings at face value.

Many ask - why does SMU still participate in these rankings. The short answer is that, even if we chose not to, it appears we will still be ranked, using data that is pulled from different public sources, even if the data is not fit for purpose because of different definitions and categorisations.

sandra@sph.com.sg

In the light of the coronavirus situation, The Straits Times Education Forum on Reimagining Universities has been cancelled.



In this last of a four-part series, Senior Education Correspondent Sandra Davie talks to Singapore Management University president Lily Kong on the changes that the coronavirus pandemic will bring to universities



This is brought to life in the way we approach learning, research and industry collaboration. At SMU, we believe we can create different and better outcomes by partnering with industry and communities to effect meaningful impact.

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