

Lawrence Wong lays out 3 areas where universities can do better

The reimagined uni will play a key role in shaping future of S'pore society, he says



Jolene Ang

As Covid-19 pushes learning institutes to transform, universities in Singapore must disrupt themselves or be forced to do so.

Education Minister Lawrence Wong stressed this yesterday as he laid out three areas in which Singapore universities can do better - in teaching and learning, embracing lifelong learning, and collaborating with industry.

Even before Covid-19, there was talk that the university sector would be completely disrupted by technology.

The pandemic has prompted more questions about such trends, and there are further predictions that there will be so much disruption that some universities may have to close, he said.

"We are not immune to these trends... But our approach has been not to allow external forces to disrupt us, but to proactively disrupt ourselves instead."

He spoke at The Straits Times Education Forum 2021 on Reimagin-

ing Universities, Post-Covid, held in partnership with the Singapore Management University.

The forum, held online this year, examined the ripple effects of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education and the changes that it will forge.

DOING BETTER IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

The criticism that universities prioritise research over teaching is not new but is not always fair, said Mr Wong.

"In my experience, some of the best researchers are also excellent and most inspiring teachers. But this criticism exists, and we are aware of it."

Globally, there are also criticisms that the university curriculum has not changed much.

"But in Singapore, we've continually been looking at ways to refresh and update the quality of teaching and learning in our universities."

Students get opportunities to learn outside of lectures, including in seminars, collaborative projects, overseas opportunities, service-



based learning and internships.

"More recently, all our universities are looking at ways to provide more holistic learning... We are also looking at greater breadth, and more interdisciplinary and cross-domain knowledge."

EMBRACING LIFELONG LEARNING

Mr Wong noted that for a long time, the model of university education has been about front-

loading education at a young age - with a fixed period of education and then work.

But Singapore needs a rotational model of learning now, where work and education are rotated over the course of one's career.

This means that universities will have to cater for multiple entry points along the age distribution, rather than focusing on full-time education, he said.

This could entail looking at offer-

ing part-time degrees for working adults and modular offerings that can be stacked towards a qualification later on.

Universities must also cater for multiple entry points along the entire skills spectrum, including technical, hands-on skills, practical life skills and even social skills like relationship negotiation.

COLLABORATING CLOSELY WITH INDUSTRY

Universities can and must continue to do more in this area, said Mr Wong, adding: "When universities don't move fast enough, they become at risk of being disrupted."

The polytechnics are doing well in getting industry inputs on the school curriculum, and the universities will also have to take a leaf from the poly sector, Mr Wong said.

Noting the critical roles of universities to the well-being of Singapore and Singaporeans, Mr Wong said: "I hope to see universities of the future becoming centres of learning, nurturing a broad range of skills, having close collaboration with the industry and nurturing everyone to be a lifelong learner."

"And as our universities continue to rebuild and reimagine themselves, they will play a very important role in shaping the future of our society."

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COVID-19 A CHANCE TO RETHINK, REVITALISE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION - THE BIG STORY A8



Education Minister Lawrence Wong speaking at The Straits Times Education Forum 2021 on Reimagining Universities, Post-Covid, yesterday. With him are (from left) ST senior education correspondent Sandra Davie, Singapore Management University president Lily Kong and Ms Lydia Lim, head of schools and education products at Singapore Press Holdings. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

SINGAPORE'S APPROACH

Our approach has been not to allow external forces to disrupt us but to proactively disrupt ourselves instead. And so, over the years, we have continually reviewed and updated our university sector. That's how we have been able to grow a strong and diverse university sector in Singapore today.

EDUCATION MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG

FINDING NEW WAYS

Under normal circumstances... we send our students out into the community, out to different parts of the world for exchange programmes, community projects, internships. That cannot be replicated online. But there will be times, like now, when the circumstances don't allow and, even when things get better, you will get another virus, another pandemic. So we need to learn to pivot in and out... No, we don't fold over, we don't capitulate, we use technology again and we find ways of providing those kinds of experiences, albeit differently.

SMU PRESIDENT LILY KONG

More of curriculum online may not translate into lower education costs

The Government watches the cost of higher education "like a hawk", and having more parts of the curriculum going online does not necessarily mean costs are lower, said Education Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday.

Manpower costs for faculty and staff are a key cost component for all universities, even overseas institutions, and these staff are needed to keep things going and to provide a good learning experience for students, he added.

Speaking at The Straits Times Education Forum 2021 on Reimagining Universities, Post-Covid, Mr Wong said that keeping university fees affordable has and will continue to be a key priority for his ministry.

"There is a view that, 'So much of this is going online, surely it can be cheaper,'" he said.

"Yes, if everything is 100 per cent online, sure, but that's not a university education."

"You're not going to get a university education by going online and signing up to MOOCs (massive open online courses) and doing it for four years."

"So it will be hybrid, it will be blended, which means that faculty will still be required."

But he stressed that the Ministry of Education (MOE) will continue to ensure generous subsidies for university education in Singapore.

This has been done to prevent mounting student debt problems that are prevalent in other countries.

Beyond the subsidies, there is also a range of bursaries MOE has recently enhanced, he said.

"We have done it not just for the lower-income (group), but bursaries go up to the middle-income (group)."

"And I think that's the right approach, because it ensures a progressive system."

For example, those with a gross monthly household income of \$6,901 to \$9,000 or per capita income of \$1,726 to \$2,250 are eligible for bursaries.

This applies to full- and part-time Institute of Technical Education Nitec and Higher Nitec students, polytechnic students and university undergraduates.

Bursary quantum have also been increased.

Those who are well off can pay the subsidised fees, said Mr Wong.

"But for the families who have difficulties - the lower-income, even up to the middle-income (group) -

generous bursaries are provided by the Government, and the universities themselves have their own sponsors and donors to help support these children as well."

However, one point raised at the forum by speakers was that even with fees made more affordable, some parents may still want their children to enter the workforce early to generate income and forgo their studies.

Addressing this, Mr Wong said: "It may be so. But I think that we will then have to look at this in different ways."

"We can, for example, help the families through other means, not necessarily through MOE and the universities, but through other (forms of) social assistance."

The student could also consider work-study programmes, he said, adding that even if the student does wish to go out into the working world, he or she can continue one's education at a later time, he added.

A polytechnic graduate, for instance, could decide to look for a job first.

"But it doesn't mean that you're forgoing your chance to get a degree," said Mr Wong. "You can do so later in life as well."

Jolene Ang

Unis must offer industry-required skills and deepen tie-ups with firms

Ng Wei Kai

Universities must continue to provide industry-required skills and deepen collaboration with companies, or risk disruption, said Education Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday.

He cited the example of technology company Dyson in the United Kingdom, which set up its own Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology in 2017 to train a ready supply of engineers to tackle a shortage of such professionals in the British economy.

Mr Wong said: "They (Dyson) set up Dyson Institute because of their difficulties in getting engineering graduates in the UK, so they had their own institute to meet this engineering skills gap."

"At the start, Dyson Institute offered degrees in partnership with the University of Warwick. Now it's been granted its own degree-awarding powers, so it doesn't need a university any more, it's become a university in its own right."

While Mr Wong felt that such drastic measures are not currently necessary in Singapore, he urged universities here to continue to

COLLABORATION ESSENTIAL

In our fight against Covid-19, for example, we have also seen how such university-academic-industry collaboration has been most useful, for example, in developing test kits and other solutions to fight the virus.

EDUCATION MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG

strengthen and deepen their collaboration with companies.

"Our polytechnics do very well in this regard, and the universities increasingly will also have to take a lead from the polytechnic sector in getting industry inputs to shape curriculum," he added.

Singapore Management University (SMU) president Lily Kong highlighted her university's efforts to engage with industry partners and develop industry-related skills. Pointing to SMU's collaborations with technology giant Google and local healthcare group SingHealth, she said: "Work-study

arrangements are now very much a part of what we do. We have programmes that are co-developed with Google Singapore, for example, in data analytics, and co-delivered by Google practitioners and we've internships with Google partners."

"We have a work-study arrangement with SingHealth in health economics and management co-created with the senior leaders in SingHealth so that even though we're not producing doctors and nurses as some of the other universities do, we produce those who can run hospitals."

Mr Wong, who also co-chairs the multi-ministry task force tackling the Covid-19 pandemic, exhorted universities to continue to push the frontiers of knowledge and discovery, and be part of the broader ecosystem for innovation and entrepreneurship and enterprise within the country.

"In our fight against Covid-19, for example, we have also seen how such university-academic-industry collaboration has been most useful, for example, in developing test kits and other solutions to fight the virus," he added.

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