

News analysis

Covid-19 presents opportunity to rethink, revitalise university education

Online learning has led some to reconsider price, value proposition of higher education

Sandra Davie

Senior Education Correspondent

Blended or hybrid models of degree education and accreditation of skills acquired through non-traditional modes of learning are not new considerations for universities. For years, institutions have discussed, debated and experimented with various modes of teaching and learning.

The pandemic, though, forced them to make online delivery the mainstay, and even conduct their examinations and yearly admission exercises online. In the process, universities have been forced to adapt and adjust the way in which they deliver their programmes. The forced experiment with online instruction gave them a first-hand close-up of the benefits and the limitations of these different modes and technologies. This has also significantly lowered the psychological barriers to adopting non-traditional modes of teaching and learning. This is not just for students, but also faculty. The switch to online learning has also led students and parents to reconsider the price and value proposition of higher education. For quite a while now, there have

been questions about whether the traditional four-year degree route is best suited for our current needs. Some posit that shorter, nimbler, skills-focused courses that provide just-in-time learning are more suited to a digital economy, where continuous upskilling is needed to keep pace with technological advances. Various pundits, including New York University Stern School professor Scott Galloway, have predicted that post-Covid, the big technology companies are likely to make moves to disrupt higher education. Prof Galloway, who wrote the book *Post Corona: From Crisis To Opportunity*, predicts that the likes of Apple and Google will join forces with elite universities in the United States to offer hybrid degrees. Think iStanford and MIT@Google - online learning combined with on-campus learning. This may not be a negative for higher education, especially in the US, where tuition fees have gone up



1,400 per cent over the past 40 years. It will moderate costs and enable more students to access the best university education that American institutions have to offer. But is this likely to happen in Singapore? After all, we are not

subject to the same push factors - steep rises in tuition fees and student debt. But as Prof Galloway has predicted, if indeed big technology companies and elite universities join forces, they are likely to want to reach out to the world and not confine themselves to students in their home countries. If Stanford or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were to offer hybrid degrees that are fully accredited by the universities and certified by the likes of Apple or Google, their offerings are likely to become an attractive option for students around the world, including Singapore. At The Straits Times Education Forum held yesterday, questions on costs and affordability of university education came up time and again. It is an issue that cannot be ignored by universities and governments, as the pandemic has hurt many families and laid bare the divides and

inequities in society. Already, there are parents who have expressed worries about whether they can afford a polytechnic or university education for their children. But it is not just a matter of being able to afford the fees. Some of them have been hit so hard that they need their children to go out to work to help support the family. In recent years, the Ministry of Education and the universities have increased their financial help, but also created multiple pathways giving disadvantaged students opportunities to progress to higher education. It was heartening to hear Education Minister Lawrence Wong, who spoke at the forum, make a pledge to keep university education accessible and affordable. He said it has and will continue to be a key priority for his ministry. Overall, there is reason to be optimistic. As Mr Wong said, our universities have not been stuck in time and have continued to innovate in many areas. "Our approach has been not to allow external forces to disrupt us, but to proactively disrupt ourselves instead," he said of the six local universities. With this openness to innovate, we can expect that the longer-term effect will be a revitalising of university education through new thinking and technologies. sandra@sph.com.sg

Minister: Employers should look at value and skills, not just qualifications

Higher education does not necessarily have to be front-loaded - meaning people may choose to start their working life first before circling back to complete their undergraduate or higher degrees. Increasingly, there are more options for Singaporeans to return to university several times to upgrade and upskill at different points of their career. Employers should not see this as a disruption. Instead, they should look at students and graduates for who they are, their experiences and the value proposition that they bring to the workplace, said Education Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday. Speaking at The Straits Times Education Forum 2021 on Reimagining Universities, Post-Covid, he said: "That will be the ultimate test - (hiring) not based on the qualifications or credentials or whether you had this experience or that experience, which somehow feels different from what I had gone through. "Of course, it will be different, but look at the value that the stu-

dent or the graduate brings to the workplace - the skills, the competencies and the contributions. "We hope, with all that we are doing and all that the universities are doing, each batch of graduates will be able to bring more value and more contributions to the workplace and to employers." Mr Wong, who obtained his bachelor's and master's in economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, said he was reminded of how the Public Service Commission had questioned him upon his return on why he chose to take music classes at university. "But I think mindsets have changed, and it will continue to change," he said. The forum, which was held online this year, examined the ripple effects of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education and the changes that it will forge. Professor Lily Kong, president of the Singapore Management University that co-organised the forum, added that "every generation will look at the next generation and see how they're different". She said she has heard senior leaders in companies and firms say that they have learnt new things from new graduates. "The younger generation is going to bring a whole lot of technological skills that the older generation doesn't have, for example." She added: "Of course, senior employers and employees have the experience that younger ones don't have. So it's really about learning from one another and optimising the skill sets within a company." Jolene Ang

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Technology should not be pushed to students for its own sake, says SMU president Lily Kong. The focus should be on learning outcomes and technology should be an enabler for that. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

Tech should be a learning enabler and enhance outcomes: SMU president

Ng Wei Kai

Technology should be an enabler for learning, rather than pushed for its own sake, said Singapore Management University (SMU) president Lily Kong. Instead of focusing on how the Covid-19 pandemic is going to disrupt education through the increasing importance of technology, Professor Kong said that the focus should be on learning outcomes. "The much more important question is what are the outcomes of

higher education that we hope to see and what is the best way of delivering those outcomes. And for me, technology is a part of it," she said. Professor Kong was speaking at The Straits Times Education Forum 2021 on Reimagining Universities, Post-Covid yesterday. Given the work and study from home situation due to the pandemic, certain learning experiences cannot be carried out in the ways preferred. "Then we use technology to make the best of the situation, and we deliver the best experiences that we can until such time that we can pivot offline," she said.

ST senior education correspondent Sandra Davie added that despite these questions, the current generation of students may be best placed to benefit from the current situation. "Look at the limitations, as well as the advantages to be accrued from doing things online. SMU, for example, was forced to do admissions interviews and submissions online. But in the process of doing that, they realised that we are dealing with Generation Z, who are very comfortable online," she said. "They were actually better at interacting through the Internet than

the people running the interviews, so it also made the admissions officers think - should we do more of this online?" she added. Education Minister Lawrence Wong said the increased use of technology in universities has, however, created questions about the fundamental worth of university education, especially in Western countries. "Even before Covid-19, there have been predictions that the university sector would be completely disrupted by technology. You see this particularly in countries like America and the UK because tuition fees have been rising, costs have escalated, universities become more bloated, the student debts rise," he said. Questions have been raised about the value of university education - exacerbated by the pandemic because students are unable to attend classes face-to-face. This has prompted more questions about whether universities need to do more to reform themselves, Mr Wong added. "In fact, there are now predictions in some of these countries that there would be so much disruption that some universities may have to close, and we may well see the demise of more universities because they are unable to cope with the pressures," he said. Prof Kong also pointed out that several predictions on technology's effect on education have failed to come true, despite the pandemic. "In 2008, a group of Harvard professors wrote a book called *Disrupting Class*. And they predicted that by 2019, about half of all middle and high school courses would be delivered online by 2019... And we all know that that hasn't happened," she said. The book she was referring to was *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change The Way The World Learns*, by Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn and Curtis W. Johnson. "Some people believe that it will still happen, aided by Covid-19, but the jury is out," she added. ngweikai@sph.com.sg

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