

Universities must change or lose their place to alternative education providers

In the third of a four-part series on the changing role of universities, OECD's education chief Andreas Schleicher talks to The Straits Times' senior education correspondent Sandra Davie on how universities have to evolve to stay relevant.

For some time now, people have been questioning the value of universities. The challenge became more robust in the last two years as the Covid-19 pandemic hit and universities began to deliver their programmes online, said a global education expert.

Mr Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), stressed that universities have to make changes or they may lose the "monopoly" they have on providing higher education and accreditation for workers to access higher-level jobs.

He said in an interview with The Straits Times: "When Covid-19 hit and universities went online, students and their parents asked if they should pay tens of thousands of dollars in fees to attend lessons online."

"Students go to university to learn from great professors, do ground-breaking research, collaborate with their peers on projects and experience the social life of campus living. It won't do to just offer a bunch of courses and give them a qualification at the end of the course."

He applauded Singapore's management of the pandemic and how the local universities went back to providing on-campus learning with safety management measures in place. That has not been the case in many countries around the world.

Unless they change, universities will see even more students switching to alternative higher education providers who run courses and certify competencies for skills in demand.

"It's already happening in some fields, such as computing, with tech companies," he said, adding that universities have to prepare for a world where their location or reputations will become less important. What will matter to learners are programmes that will help them access the jobs they aspire to.

Q Do you think the traditional four-year undergraduate degree route will stay?

A In a world faced with constant change, front-loaded learning – the current model of studying four years for a degree and then going out to build a career – will not work any more.

We have to keep learning while earning. You have to keep going back to relearn and reskill, as you have to adapt constantly and pivot and change jobs.

Continuing education will be done in many different places and many different ways, both online and offline, on campus and at the workplace.

Universities have to adapt to the new ways in which their students will prefer to learn, if not they will lose their position as main providers of higher education.

As I always say, we designed our education systems, including higher education, very much in the industrial age when the objective was conformity and compliance with the established wisdom of our times.

It will not do in tomorrow's



Mr Andreas Schleicher says our societies were always most successful when we could nurture students to be able to develop a sense of empathy towards others, and not just at the individual level to a specific person, but also to other cultures. Think about the Renaissance period where people from all walks of life came together to build great things, he says. That openness is absolutely central to societies succeeding. And that, he adds, is really the central role of education. PHOTO: OECD

About Andreas Schleicher

Mr Andreas Schleicher, 57, is director for education and skills, and special adviser on education policy to the secretary-general at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris.

As a key member of the OECD senior management team, Mr Schleicher supports the secretary-general's strategy to produce analysis and policy advice that advances economic growth and social progress.

He also promotes the work of the directorate for education and skills on a global stage.

In addition to policy and country reviews, the work of the directorate includes the Programme for International Student Assessment, the OECD Survey of Adult Skills, the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey and the development and analysis of benchmarks on the performance of education systems.

Before joining the OECD, Mr Schleicher was director for analysis at the International Association for Educational Achievement.

He studied physics in Germany and received a degree in mathematics and statistics in Australia.

He is the recipient of numerous honours and awards, including the "Theodor Heuss" prize, awarded in the name of the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany for "exemplary democratic engagement".

He holds an honorary professorship at the University of Heidelberg.

A German citizen, Mr Schleicher is married, with three children. He speaks German, English, Italian and French.

world, where we need to create more environments where students can explore, where they can take risks and try out new ideas. A teacher or professor will be more of a coach, a mentor, a facilitator, a designer of innovative learning environments.

You can see many good, innovative programmes, some being tried out by well-established universities. We must enable more of these new ideas to flourish in education.

Q With the rapid pace of change, and technology and knowledge cycles speeding up, it is hard to predict the jobs of the future and prepare students for them. What can universities do?

A Knowledge and skills acquired in education risk becoming quickly outdated in an age where knowledge grows exponentially and job market expectations are rapidly shifting.

In a world where shocks like pandemics and extreme weather events owing to climate change, social unrest and political polarisation are expected to be more frequent, we must prepare young people to adjust and adapt to quick, unexpected disruptions and changes.

As far as jobs go, universities need to stop preparing young people for the jobs that existed a generation ago, study the broad changes and trends and prepare their young students for jobs which

do not yet exist. Faculty should not just be focused on giving their students deep conceptual understanding of a field. What is just as important, is fostering the ability of young people to apply the knowledge they have accumulated in new situations. In this way, we give them the confidence to deal with the unfamiliar.

I feel entrepreneurship education is much more important now than it was a generation ago because it teaches those skills and personal attributes which are important to the modern labour market. The art of being enterprising – solution-focused attitudes, spotting opportunities and dealing with uncertainties – all these will enable young people to identify and seize future opportunities.

Q In many universities around the world, there is much more emphasis being placed on multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning. How important is this?

A Conventionally, our approach to problems was to break them down into manageable bits and pieces, confined to narrow disciplines, and then to teach students the techniques to solve them. Today, however, knowledge advances by synthesising different fields of knowledge, making connections between ideas that previously seemed unrelated.

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It demands open-mindedness, making connections between ideas that seem unrelated and becoming familiar with knowledge in other fields.

Q You have spoken about the need to imbue students with an "internal guidance system" that may make them more open-minded, empathetic and successful global citizens. How important is that?

A I don't think we have much choice. If we want our students to develop as individuals... if we want to live in harmony with the planet, I don't think we have much choice but to pay attention to building this "guidance system".

By that I mean, nurturing in students that kind of compass that helps them to be open and appreciate the different ways of thinking. It's not just listening to the words of other people, but you need to be able to develop that sense of empathy towards others, and not just at the individual level to a specific person, but also to other cultures.

Our societies were always most successful when we did that well. Think about the Renaissance period where people from all walks of life came together to build great things. That openness is absolutely central to societies succeeding.

I think this is really the central role of education.

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