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To keep up with the times, universities in Singapore must do more than produce fresh school-leavers for the job market.

The education system must pay attention to those who have already graduated and retrain about half a million adult learners each year, said Education Minister Chan Chun Sing on Thursday (Feb 10) as he laid out his vision for the role of universities in meeting the needs of the future.

These institutions, said Mr Chan, must focus on continual learning, build connections with others beyond their grounds and have confidence in charting their own path.

He added that society's definition of success must change as it is not about how well a person does at one point of his life, nor is it about front-loading education at a young age.

Rather, learning should take place throughout a person's life and universities must be places that people regularly return to, to be equipped with new knowledge and skills.

Mr Chan was speaking at The Straits Times Education Forum 2022 on the evolving role of universities, held in partnership with the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The event, which was held in a hybrid format, discussed how the work of universities must extend beyond their campus grounds and adapt to changes in society, be it due to technological, social or economic forces.

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The session, which was held at the SMU Yong Pung How School of Law, also featured SMU president Lily Kong and Mr Andreas Schleicher, who is the director for education and skills, and special adviser on education policy to the secretary-general at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

In his speech, Mr Chan said that in the past, a person might take almost 20 years to prepare for his first, and perhaps only, job for life.

"But what if we need to do 10 different jobs for life, changing every four to five years on average? This is our generation," he said.

Topping up the knowledge and skills of people as they take on new jobs every four to five years would mean upgrading about a quarter of around three million locals in Singapore's workforce each year, he added. This would equate to about half a million adult workers every year.

"Hence, the definition of success for our education system cannot be just how well we prepare a cohort of 30,000 to 40,000 students for the job market every year. It should be that plus retraining and upgrading about half a million adult learners each year," he said.

"Therefore, instead of focusing on the challenges of falling cohort sizes, we should actively seize the opportunity arising from an increasing number of workers who need retraining and upskilling," said Mr Chan.

Emphasising the need for lifelong learning, he said there is no pre-defined pathway to success. It is not so much about how many students in a cohort enrol in universities and polytechnics or the Institute of Technical Education at a particular point in their lives, he said.

Increasingly, what matters is how many students go on to acquire relevant qualifications - from degrees and diplomas to stackable modules and micro-credentials - at various points in their lives to meet changing needs, he added.

"The skills to learn fast, unlearn and relearn become more important than getting a particular grade at a particular point in life," he said.

Hence, a "lifetime participation rate" in training and education would be a more appropriate description of what Singapore wants to achieve, said Mr Chan, instead of the traditional cohort participation rate that refers to the proportion of students in a yearly cohort that progresses to university.

To achieve this, universities must step up efforts to have a more diverse pool of faculty members by hiring beyond those in academia to cater better to adult learners and build closer links with industry, he added.

"As the universities rebalance their pre-employment training, or PET, and focus on continuing education and training, or CET, they will accordingly review their staffing composition," he said.

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Mr Chan also encouraged universities to not be insular but work with one another as a team and tap one another's strengths in areas from research and teaching to partnering industry.

Acknowledging the changing role of universities, SMU's Professor Kong said: "Universities are used to working with young people... but as we begin to work with adult learners, one of the things that we realised is that the traditional approach to (teaching) theory and foundation, then later on (learning) how to apply it, is just not going to work."

Hence, SMU has been exploring different teaching methods like co-creating and co-delivering content and skills with industry partners, she added.

OECD's Mr Schleicher said traditional academic disciplines are unlikely to disappear, but people will increasingly need to think across boundaries to manage problems of the future.

"The kind of things that are easy to teach and easy to learn have also become easily digitised," he said. "Universities basically need to pay a lot more attention to those who have already graduated - that is the only kind of pool that is still untapped."

Institutions must also give learners more ownership of their learning, he said, by moving from traditional degree courses to a "much more granular way of giving people greater ownership over what, how and when in their life they learn".

"Learning is not a place, learning is an activity," he added.

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