

# Education system must retrain half a million adults yearly: Chan

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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 yesterday.

Laying out his vision for the role of universities in meeting the needs of the future, he said institutions must focus on continual learning and build connections with industry and others beyond their campuses.

They must also have confidence in charting their own paths, he added.

In a keynote speech at The Straits Times Education Forum, Mr Chan said society's definition of success must change because it is not about how well a person does at one point in 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 people regularly return to and get equipped with new knowledge and skills.

The forum was held in partnership with Singapore Management University (SMU), which hosted it too. It also featured SMU president Lily Kong and Mr Andreas Schleicher – 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 address, Mr Chan said that



Education Minister Chan Chun Sing speaking at The Straits Times Education Forum yesterday, where he laid out his vision for the role of universities in meeting the needs of the future. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

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 knowledge and skills as people take new jobs every four to five years would mean upgrading about a quarter of about three million workers yearly, he added.

Mr Chan said: "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.

"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."

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 said.

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

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. Mr Chan also encouraged universities to work as a team and tap one another's strengths in areas from research and teaching to partnering industry.

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