

Definition of success in education system must change: Chan

Beyond producing school leavers for the job market, it has to upskill adult workers

Ng Wei Kai

The pace of acquiring skills and new knowledge must intensify as Singaporeans face the reality of having to change jobs every five years, said Education Minister Chan Chun Sing.

He added that about 20 per cent to 25 per cent of Singapore's local workforce of about three million may need to upskill yearly – that is, about half a million adult workers every year.

To do this, the definition of suc-

cess for the education system must change, said Mr Chan in a keynote address at The Straits Times Education Forum 2022 on the evolving role of universities.

The forum was held in partnership with Singapore Management University (SMU) yesterday.

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.

The minister went on to detail



four points where the education system must change to achieve this new goal.

He said: "First, we need to jettison the concept that we can ever be done with learning."

No amount of education early in life can prepare Singaporeans for work, he added, and only continual learning can help them stay current for the rest of their lives.

Second, Singapore must let go of the idea that there is a pre-defined pathway to success.

Mr Chan said: "Success is never static. It matters less how many of our students in a particular cohort go to universities and polytechnics or the Institute of Technical Education at a particular point in their lives.

"It matters more, much more, how many of our students can acquire the appropriate degrees, diplomas, graduate diplomas and even stackable modules and micro-credentials throughout and at relevant points in their lives, to meet their ever-evolving life cycle needs."

Mr Chan added that a "lifetime participation rate" in training and education is a more appropriate description of what the education system wants to achieve at large, rather than the current practice of measuring cohort participation rates at the various institutes of higher learning here.

Third, skills and knowledge must be constantly combined and re-

combined to create value in a quickly evolving market.

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

The skills to collaborate across different disciplines, cultures and perspectives to create something new are now more important than ever before, he said.

Mr Chan added that flexible modules across multiple disciplines that allow students to pivot across sectors have become even more important.

He gave the example of SMU's plan to give some students the choice to design their own curriculum and build their own degree courses.

And fourth, Mr Chan said, the education system needs to shorten the time to market for skills and knowledge.

He added that there must be faster movement from frontier research, leading industrial technology and breakthrough market practices, to academia and back to the market.

He said: "This defines our competitiveness as a people and system."

To achieve this, the education system must sharpen its approach towards internships, academia and industrial collaborations, as well as alumni engagement, he added.

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S'pore unis urged to link up with the world, community and industry

Universities here must work harder to connect with the world, with Singapore's communities and industries, as well as one another, said Education Minister Chan Chun Sing.

Singapore's educational institutions should not just transmit knowledge, but also become connectors for collaboration in response to an increasingly fragmented world, he added.

Mr Chan said: "In a world that is becoming more fast-paced, more divided and yet more interconnected, we will need a strong network of connections to keep us current, keep us together, and keep us open."

He was speaking at The Straits Times Education Forum 2022 on the evolving role of universities, held in partnership with Singapore Management University yesterday.

Universities should be platforms for young people to grow up understanding and interacting with the rest of the world, Mr Chan said, adding that Singapore should continue to send students overseas and welcome foreign students here.

Universities – both faculty and students – should also tighten their connection with industry, he added.

To do this, Singapore's polytechnic, university and Institute of Technical Education students must have access to quality internships.

He added that university faculty are critical for the relationship between industry and university, and more opportunities must be created for faculty to keep up with the latest industry developments.

This may mean more diversity among educators, he said, including tapping more industry experts to work as adjunct or practice-track faculty.

Mr Chan said educators will need different strategies and skills as they work with adult learners.

Universities also need to "up their game" in terms of their connection to the community, he added. "This will help the universities better understand the challenges of our community, industry and the world... to create better solutions for Singapore and the world."

Mr Chan also said Singapore's universities should work to deepen their collaboration with one another. He said: "I have an aspiration where our six autonomous universities operate as one team, leveraging each other's strengths... An aspiration where students can take modules across different universities, like the Boston system."

Mr Chan also spoke on the importance of instilling confidence in Singapore students. He said: "In a world of contesting ideas, ideology and values, we must have the confidence to chart our own destiny based on a pragmatic and disciplined search for what works best for our people..."

"While we learn from the world, we must never relegate ourselves to just copying other people's ideas without context."

Ng Wei Kai



Education Minister Chan Chun Sing (third from left) with (from left) moderator and Straits Times Singapore editor Zakir Hussain; Singapore Management University (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, at The Straits Times Education Forum 2022 held at SMU's Yong Pung How School of Law yesterday. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

CREATING VALUE IN AN EVOLVING MARKET

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



EDUCATION MINISTER CHAN CHUN SING, on one of four areas where the education system must change to achieve the new goal of retraining and upgrading about half a million adult learners each year.

ON WORKING WITH ADULT LEARNERS

Universities are used to working with young people... but as we begin to work with adult learners, one of the things we realised is that the traditional approach (of teaching) is just not going to work.



SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT LILY KONG, who says that the university has been exploring teaching methods such as co-creating and co-delivering content and skills with industry partners.

Focus on older workers to close skills gap: OECD adviser

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

As a victim of its own success, Singapore must address its growing inter-generational skills gap by focusing more on older workers, said Mr Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

"The faster young people move forward in education, the more older workers are left behind," he said yesterday.

According to OECD data, Singapore is currently the country with the largest inter-generational skills gap, he said during a panel discussion on the evolving role of universities at The Straits Times Education Forum 2022, held in partnership with Singapore Management

University (SMU).

"The labour market in Singapore is very good at extracting value from the skills of people. This is unlike other countries in Asia where there is a mismatch in skills and jobs available," noted Mr Schleicher, who is also special adviser on education policy to the secretary-general at the OECD.

This also means fewer than one in 10 workers in Singapore have better skills than what they need for their current job, he said, and there is a very thin layer of "surplus skills" as most are already in use.

"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," noted Mr Schleicher, if Singapore wants to see significant productivity gains.

He added that despite the SkillsFuture movement, which he de-

scribed as path-breaking, many Singaporeans still value academic learning as the major route to success. But change is on the way, as more employers are able to see beyond degree qualifications and recognise value in skills and knowl-

edge that people have, he said.

"And universities still need to get that message, and advance from lumpy and long degrees to a much more granular way of learning," he said, adding that this can be done by giving people greater owner-

ship over learning.

SMU president Lily 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 (of teaching) is just not going to work."

Hence, SMU has been exploring teaching methods such as co-creating and co-delivering content and skills with industry partners.

Increasingly, adult learners can also work on real-world projects that can fulfil both their classroom and workplace demands, she said.

"So it's not an artificial divide between the world of learning and the world of practice. The more we can develop these sorts of approaches, the more people would be willing, and see the value and relevance of continuing learning."

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