

The Straits Times says

Learning to be able to keep learning

At the Straits Times Education Forum 2022 on the evolving role of universities, held in partnership with Singapore Management University last week, Education Minister Chan Chun Sing threw up a challenge to Singapore's institutions of higher learning. To keep up with the times, they 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. This is clearly not a small challenge in a small nation. However, it is a necessary call to institutions of higher learning to revisit their purpose in keeping with Singapore's evolving economic circumstances, and so that those who are

in, or entering, the workforce can also adapt effectively to the demands of an ever-changing global economy and marketplace.

While a traditional university education prepares young people intellectually and academically for the demands of the job market, that market is never static. Hence, a proper university education must be complemented by the kind of continuing learning that enables graduates to keep their skills current and stay economically relevant. As the scope and nature of jobs evolve, 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, by Mr Chan's reckon-

ing. Universities have earned good reputations as centres of academic excellence but must continually adapt and transform.

The quality and cost of a university education will increasingly also be measured by the range of opportunities that graduates have to continue with their learning journey at different stages of their lives. Efforts by universities and other institutions will succeed only if those in the workforce embrace the opportunities that are available to them. One extreme idea would be to make degrees temporary, leaving their holders with no option but to regularly renew them by returning to campus for continuing courses, physically or virtually or both.

But a better way of coming to terms with the realities of the times would be for graduates and postgraduates to view their qualifications not as a one-off entry ticket to the market, but as the start of a journey of continual learning. That is clearly going to become the norm in the job market. Indeed, the retraining and reskilling of graduates and postgraduates need not be limited to Singapore. Universities can connect students and graduates with the best opportunities available in the world through their global networks. Internships and attachments form part of an evolving international ecosystem and should also be explored, as should tie-ups with companies in the private sector here.

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