

Chan urges students: Be like eels – Eternal, Engaged Learners,

He says unis must evolve into institutes of continual learning to keep pace globally

Ang Qing

Students here need to be like eels, or Eternal and Engaged Learners (Eels), said Education Minister Chan Chun Sing yesterday.

He was speaking at the launch of a book – *Building Excellence In Higher Education: Singapore's Experience* – on the development and future of Singapore's higher-education system.

The book was co-written by the fourth and longest-serving president of Singapore Management University (SMU), Emeritus Professor Arnoud De Meyer, and SMU adjunct lecturer Jovina Ang.

Said Mr Chan: "We must dispense with the thinking that front-loading education can prepare us for the rest of our lives.

"Instead, I've always hoped our students will be like Eels – Eternal and Engaged Learners."

In his speech, Mr Chan drew on the book to outline three ways that Singapore can position universities for the future.

As the Republic's universities grow in size, governance of the higher-education sector and development of leadership teams must keep up with the complex task of leading and managing them, he said.



Education Minister Chan Chun Sing (left) and Emeritus Professor Arnoud De Meyer at the launch of the book, *Building Excellence In Higher Education: Singapore's Experience*, yesterday. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

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SMU ADJUNCT LECTURER
JOVINA ANG

Mr Chan noted that the six universities in Singapore have over 100,000 students at any one time.

Second, institutes of higher learning here must evolve into institutes of continual learning to keep pace with the world, he said, agreeing with Prof De Meyer that

the concept of alumni will become "a relic of the past".

Echoing Prof De Meyer's book, Mr Chan noted that singularly academic or on-the-job training will no longer be sufficient.

This comes as Singapore continues to strengthen the training of mid-career workers, with this year's Budget rolling out a scheme to provide highly subsidised, industry-oriented training courses to help such workers secure jobs in sectors with good hiring opportunities.

Lastly, research in universities must flow back to the industry, and leading industry skills and knowledge also need to reach labs and classrooms, said Mr Chan.

The book brings together interviews with former education ministers, including Dr Tony Tan and Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, permanent secretaries,

presidents and chairmen of universities.

In his speech, Prof De Meyer highlighted designing a system aligned to the socio-economic development of the country and significant investment in research funding for universities as two of several drivers of excellence in higher education over three decades.

Addressing cynicism about the future of Singapore's partnerships with foreign universities after the National University of Singapore decided to cease its collaboration with Yale University last year, Prof De Meyer told The Straits Times that the closure should be seen in the context of past partnerships between universities here, citing the Singapore University of Technology and Design's collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that ended in 2017.

Partnerships between universities come to a natural end when the marginal return from learning decreases and "the logic for the collaboration usually breaks down", observed Prof De Meyer.

But the higher-education system here is far from perfect, he noted in his speech, questioning whether local universities are ready for mid-career education as the population ages rapidly.

Prof De Meyer said: "Do we know enough about andragogy or how older people learn? Is the revenue stream of mid-career education stable enough to recruit faculty that may stay on for decades?"

Other challenges that universities of the future will need to navigate include the role of technology in university education, which has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, he added.

While greater emphasis has been placed on lifelong learning since the launch of SkillsFuture in 2015, Dr Ang, who also teaches adult learners at SMU, said more needs to be done to make reskilling a way of life.

Said Dr Ang: "Typically, a lot of Singaporeans tend to leverage their first degree for too long, and I think that's why we need to inculcate a mindset of continuous learning from a very young age."

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