

# Time to rethink higher education in Singapore and set our own agenda

Instead of benchmarking their achievements against universities elsewhere, our institutions should start focusing on research and partnerships that can make a difference to the region.

## Lily Kong

Singapore has always been an attentive student on the global stage. Throughout the nation's journey, we have sought inspiration and knowledge from other countries, recognising the wisdom in learning from those who excel in their respective fields. Such pragmatism has contributed in no small part to our capacity to adapt and flourish under challenging circumstances.

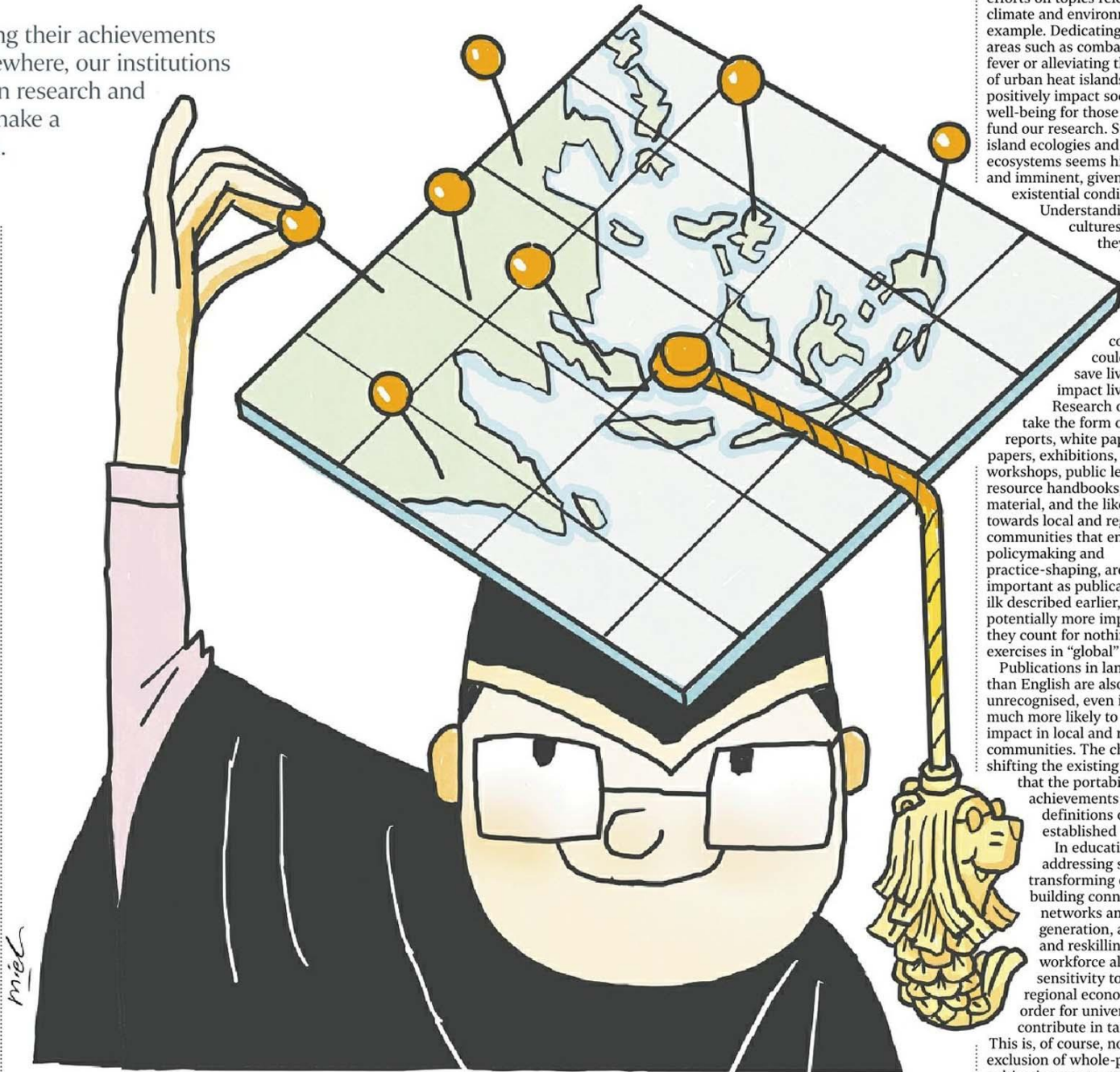
In the early years of independence, we turned to nations like Israel and Switzerland, drawing upon their experiences to shape public policies, particularly in defence and other crucial areas. When constructing the world-renowned Changi Airport, we examined and learnt from best practices around the globe. In each instance, we gleaned invaluable insights, embracing the strengths of others while refining our systems to circumvent potential pitfalls.

In much the same vein, our higher education system has drawn inspiration from diverse educational models. The United Kingdom's tradition of deep learning in single disciplines was for long the mainstay in our approach to university majors. We have also learnt from Germany's vocational education system, which emphasises practical skills and industry relevance. Japan's commitment to excellence in engineering education provided inspiration for nurturing technical expertise. The United States' liberal arts approach demonstrated the value of broad-based learning and critical thinking.

However, our historical evolution, geographical condition and societal context demand that we go beyond emulation. We must now cultivate more distinctive institutional identities and approaches if we are to assume targeted roles in shaping national and regional trajectories and outcomes.

### AN IMPACT AGENDA FOR SINGAPORE AND THE REGION

Singapore's universities, while young compared with the



hallowed halls of Oxbridge and Harvard, have garnered significant recognition in Asia and globally. This speaks volumes about how universities here have learnt to compete on the basis of terms set elsewhere, evidenced, inter alia, by research published internationally in the "best" journals, almost invariably in the

anglophone world, written in the English language, often controlled by major publishers and editors in the "Western" world. These are standard measures of "success" and reputation.

Important as it is to compete on the "global stage", a reference frequently meaning the anglophone world (even while

about 75 per cent of the global population speaks no English), it is timely to resist conformity and an imitation mindset. Perhaps it is now suitable to relinquish the fixation on benchmarking achievements against universities elsewhere as the only or even primary measure of success. Catering to academic, intellectual,

or policy audiences in other parts of the world seems to fall short of what local universities should aspire towards.

Rather than competing to speak to agendas set elsewhere, using concepts and ideas relevant to different histories and societies, our mission should be redirected towards generating perspectives

and solutions for pressing issues in the region. Rather than using measures relevant in other contexts, it is time to think about what matters for us nationally and regionally, even while recognising that there are some challenges that remain global.

For a start, let us think about research that matters. As an equatorial nation, it seems only natural that we concentrate efforts on topics relevant to our climate and environment, for example. Dedicating resources to areas such as combating dengue fever or alleviating the challenges of urban heat islands will positively impact social well-being for those whose taxes fund our research. Studying island ecologies and city ecosystems seems highly intuitive and imminent, given our existential conditions.

Understanding local cultures and how they shape behavioural responses to policy, technology and communication could potentially save lives and impact livelihoods. Research outputs that take the form of policy reports, white papers, position papers, exhibitions, community workshops, public lectures, resource handbooks, training material, and the like, directed towards local and regional communities that engage in policymaking and practice-shaping, are arguably as important as publications of the ilk described earlier, and perhaps potentially more impactful. Yet, they count for nothing in many exercises in "global" comparison.

Publications in languages other than English are also unrecognised, even if they are much more likely to make an impact in local and regional communities. The challenge in shifting the existing hegemony is that the portability of achievements is limited by definitions of success established elsewhere.

In education, addressing skills gaps in transforming economies, building connections and networks among the next generation, and upskilling and reskilling the workforce all require sensitivity to local and regional economic needs in order for universities to contribute in targeted ways.

This is, of course, not to the exclusion of whole-person cultivation nor to generic skills development. But an impact agenda requires programmes, pedagogies and priorities suited to national and regional needs, and requires resources and impact assessment in ways that are contextually meaningful.

Even within national systems, it is important to uphold and celebrate diversity among institutions rather than have all gravitate to singular measures of

publication in first-tier journals, but without appropriate adjustment, they may well be inappropriate explanations for national and regional experiences. Functionally, adopting programmes and pedagogies from different learning contexts without sensitivity to economic needs, cultural nuances and styles of learning runs the risk of graduating students to unemployment and creating cultural collisions.

Instead of relying on the paths of other institutions in other contexts as models for institutional development, it is our responsibility to undertake a more fundamental examination of what we stand for, challenge existing paradigms, and chart our paths, respecting other traditions and experiences, while staying true to ours.

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## Need for institutions to challenge existing paradigms

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success. In Singapore, each of the seven universities embodies strengths, approaches, priorities, and areas of expertise that warrant nurturing. Using the same metrics of success forces universities to behave more like one another, while diverse offerings and approaches in fact enhance the overall ecosystem and dynamism of higher education in the country. The combined contributions make for a more robust system overall.

### PARTNERSHIPS TO TAP DIVERSE STRENGTHS

In striking a path of relevance and impact, there is merit in avoiding competition of the sort that drives all to a mean. Far more valuable is collaboration that draws on diverse strengths, thus amplifying collective impact.

Inter-university and university-industry collaborations can inject much vitality and create significant impact.

In a world where there is urgent need to translate knowledge into feasible solutions to address real-world problems, partnerships are good springboards for innovation. A case in point is the Create4Good Challenge, a social initiative jointly organised by Singapore Management University (SMU) and the Singapore University of Technology and Design from 2015 to 2020. This programme fostered collaboration among students from both universities, encouraging them to synergise strengths in entrepreneurship and technology to create smart and sustainable solutions that addressed pressing social needs. Over the years, winning innovations included tech start-ups supporting individuals

with disabilities and their caregivers, and cleantech solutions like waste upcycling.

More can be done to expand such social impact initiatives. For instance, universities can establish more partnerships with local communities to design sustainable urban planning solutions. Collectively, we can build capacity by imparting skills and knowledge on urban gardening, energy conservation and waste management. These efforts will enable residents to take greater ownership of their environment and contribute to the sustainable development agenda.

Collaborations should also extend beyond academia to encompass industry, with a focus on addressing challenges faced by business, government, and society. One such example is Dell Technologies' collaboration with SMU, the Singapore Institute of

Technology, Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Singapore Polytechnic in 2021 to co-develop curriculum in emerging technologies like cloud computing, data analytics, the Internet of Things and digital cities management, in ways relevant to Singapore.

Additionally, we must not neglect the value of collaborations across geographical boundaries, as these can potentially harness international action for much-needed change. Our neighbouring countries offer diverse cultures, thriving entrepreneurial ecosystems, and untapped partnership prospects. Universities have an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the interconnected challenges facing South-east Asian countries, their diverse socio-cultural contexts and governance structures. By nurturing closer

ties, building trust and facilitating exchanges, we can unlock opportunities for growth and development across South-east Asia.

Singapore's demonstrated ability to address complex societal issues through efficient governance and evidence-based policymaking puts us in a strong position to spearhead research on shared policy challenges in Asia. In tandem, universities' research efforts can be directed to issues like climate change mitigation, disaster resilience and public health management, culminating in policy recommendations to governments or regional organisations.

### STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

To make meaningful impact, it behoves our institutes of higher learning to chart a path that is contextually relevant. This may mean the assumed wisdom of what constitutes excellence sometimes needs revisiting.

Intellectually, importing theories and concepts developed in other contexts may secure

publication in first-tier journals, but without appropriate adjustment, they may well be inappropriate explanations for national and regional experiences. Functionally, adopting programmes and pedagogies from different learning contexts without sensitivity to economic needs, cultural nuances and styles of learning runs the risk of graduating students to unemployment and creating cultural collisions.

Instead of relying on the paths of other institutions in other contexts as models for institutional development, it is our responsibility to undertake a more fundamental examination of what we stand for, challenge existing paradigms, and chart our paths, respecting other traditions and experiences, while staying true to ours.

• Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor. Her research has focused on urban transformations, and social and cultural change in Asia.