

SMU partners 4 overseas universities to advance people-focused urban research

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VIENNA – The Singapore Management University (SMU) and four universities in other countries have come together to conduct joint research on how city dwellers navigate and shape the environment in which they live.

Apart from SMU, the four other members of the Global Alliance on Sustainable Urban Societies are Boston University in the US, the London School of Economics and Political Science, the University of Melbourne in Australia, and the University of Toronto in Canada.

The partnership was announced on July 2 at SMU City Dialogues, a conference held in Vienna, Austria, which brought together global academics, government officials and corporates to discuss how cities can resist various shocks, from climate change to financial crises.

“The real motivation for this alliance is to put humans first and recognise that people are the engines of cities and sustainability,” said Professor Orlando Woods, di-



SMU Urban Institute director Orlando Woods (far right) at the signing for the formation of the Global Alliance on Sustainable Urban Societies in Vienna on July 1 with (from left) LSE’s head of geography and environment Hyun Bang Shin; Boston University’s Initiative on Cities director Loretta Lees; the University of Melbourne’s Melbourne Centre for Cities director Cathy Oke; and the University of Toronto’s School of Cities director Karen Chapple. PHOTO: SMU

rector of the one-year-old SMU Urban Institute.

The institute aims to address the urban challenges that confront Singapore and key Asian cities.

“(For urban issues), so much research is dominated by the built environment, where we want to build buildings better, we want to perfect digital systems to make cities smarter, and AI... but they never actually talk to people who

use these systems,” said Prof Woods.

The alliance aims to shift focus by prioritising the very people who live in cities, and examining the ways they move through and transform urban spaces.

“By recognising people as sensors, enablers and actuators, the collaboration acknowledges the vital, multi-faceted role of residents in shaping sustainable urban societies,” said the five universities in a joint statement on July 2.

While specific research projects have not been decided yet, one potential work area could involve examining how extreme heat affects the mental health of city dwellers. This research proposal was led by Boston University’s Initiative on Cities department and submitted for potential funding to the Wellcome Trust, a London-based charity focused on health research.

The effect of heat stress on the human body, from rashes to heat stroke, is well studied, but how rising temperatures affect people’s mental health and emotions, not so much, noted Prof Woods.

A separate Boston University study in 2022 found that on extremely hot summer days in the US, people were at higher risk of rushing to emergency departments because of crises arising from substance use, anxiety, and stress and mood disorders.

The proposed study could involve participants in several countries, including Singapore, the US and Australia, documenting how hot weather is affecting them, said Prof Woods.

Beyond joint research, the alliance will also collaborate through workshops, student exchanges and data sharing.

Professor Loretta Lees, director of the Initiative on Cities at Boston University, said the strength of the coalition lies in “working with like-minded urbanists” to find out how different cities are dealing with challenges.

Prof Woods said: “It is a formal framework through which we can do more work together... if an opportunity comes along where we need to build a bigger research team that’s not just SMU.”

In 2022, SMU and the University of Toronto compared the challenges faced by students from India in both countries and their sense of belonging as student migrants.

Soon, both universities will embark on studies related to emerging trends in transport.

The one-day SMU City Dialogues is a partner event of the World Cities Summit Mayors Forum that will be held in Vienna on July 3 and 4. The upcoming forum serves as a platform for mayors and city leaders to discuss pressing urban challenges and share solutions.

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