ST Education Forum 2026 to explore AI's role in universities and the future of learning

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SINGAPORE – For better or for worse, artificial intelligence is sweeping through Singapore's universities, forcing a fundamental rethink of how higher education is delivered and received.

Today, chatbots have evolved into 24/7 "on-the-go" professors, research assistants and intellectual sparring partners for students.

However, this convenience comes with a catch. As students lean on these tools to navigate complex coursework, institutions are grappling with the twin shadows of over-reliance and plagiarism.

Singapore's six autonomous universities have largely embraced a pragmatic stance: generative AI is permitted to varying degrees, provided students are transparent about its use.

Yet, while reported cases of academic dishonesty remain low in these institutions, professors are watching closely for signs of misuse, and are calling for more creative forms of assessment.

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The "AI boom" is no longer a distant prophecy but an active, unfolding reality that is forcing a fundamental rethink of higher education. And the critical question is: Is AI a genuine catalyst for progress, or is it simply high-tech hype?

The Straits Times Education Forum 2026, titled AI In Higher Education: Hype Or Hope?, aims to address exactly that, by fleshing out the future of learning and assessments, and exploring what it means to be a lifelong learner in the age of the machine.

Held in partnership with Singapore Management University (SMU), the forum will also explore how educators prepare graduates for their first jobs in an AI-driven economy, and whether AI truly can improve accessibility and equity on campus.

"This forum brings together educators, policymakers and industry leaders to reflect, with care and responsibility, on how AI may strengthen human capital development, as well as what it will require of universities to prepare future-ready graduates, support mid-career transitions and steward this transformation responsibly," said Professor Lily Kong, president of SMU.

The forum will be held on April 1, at SMU's Yong Pung How School of Law from 2.30pm to 4.30pm.

Minister for Education Desmond Lee will deliver opening remarks, followed by a quiz on AI, and a panel discussion.

Moderated by Professor Lim Sun Sun, vice-president of partnerships and engagement and Lee Kong Chian professor of communication and technology at SMU, the panel will delve into the evolving AI landscape.

Panellists include Mr Lee, Mr Raghav Gupta, head of education for Asia-Pacific at OpenAI, and Professor Alan Chan, SMU Provost.

After the panel, the audience will be given an opportunity to ask questions in-person and online.

Previous editions of the forum covered topics such as AI in the workplace, the green economy, and skills versus degrees. The event has been held every year since 2014, except for 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Editor of The Straits Times Jaime Ho said that this year's topic is one that offers room for optimism, but could also invite fear, or at the very least, uncertainty.

"At this year's forum, we hope to add to discussions and parse through the debate on AI in higher education, examining its potential to personalise learning, automate administrative tasks, and provide round-the-clock student support," he said, adding that it is also necessary to ask how much of this is just hype.

"We will explore whether AI risks merely automating outdated teaching methods, fostering student dependency, or distracting from core educational priorities," Mr Ho said. "Ultimately, we hope this forum deepens our collective understanding of these critical tensions."

Prof Kong added: "As economic resilience and workforce adaptability become global priorities, universities must ask not only how AI can transform teaching, but how it reshapes the way our students think, learn and reskill, and how they will work."

Registration is free, and sign-ups are now open and will close on March 26 at 11.59pm. Those who are interested can register here.