Humans stay at heart of AI mission as SMU looks inward and outward
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The Straits Times, Prime, Page 15, Section: SINGAPORE
Monday 9 March 2026
1595 words, 1394cm² in size
386,100 circulation

THE STRAITS TIMES EDUCATION FORUM 2026
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SMU SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

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ST Education Forum 2026

What: The Straits Times Education Forum 2026, held in partnership with Singapore Management University

Topic: AI In Higher Education: Hype Or Hope?

When: Wednesday, April 1. 2.30pm to 4.30pm.

Registration is currently full. To be put on the waitlist, go to str.sg/STeduforum26_waitlist

In the first of a three-part series on AI in higher education, The Straits Times speaks to SMU provost Alan Chan on balancing 'AI fluency' with human-centred learning and why the university is moving beyond the classroom to solve real-world challenges.

Gabrielle Chan

The dream of ageing safely and independently for seniors living alone has moved a step closer to reality, thanks to a network of smart sensors that knows their routines well enough to spot a missed pill or repeated forgetfulness.

This "silent guardian" is the centrepiece of one of Singapore Management University's (SMU) newest artificial intelligence-led initiatives, called the Sensors In-home for Elder Wellbeing, a collaboration between the university and Sengkang General Hospital.

The project, which aims to detect mild cognitive impairment before it progresses to dementia, utilises a network of nine non-intrusive "ambient intelligent" sensors installed in a senior's home – including a wearable one – to track daily routines without the need for cameras or microphones.

These devices monitor room-to-room transitions, sleep patterns and medication-taking behaviour, while the wearable one tracks heart rate and step count. The system then creates a detailed picture of a senior's cognitive health over time.

Professor Alan Chan, SMU's provost, says this work is distinctive because the AI models and sensors are designed to be easy to interpret, so clinicians can understand why a risk is flagged based on changes in everyday behaviour.

This allows caregivers and clinicians to intervene before any decline becomes severe, and supports independent living while ensuring human oversight, he says.

"These are not technology demonstrations," says Prof Chan, but part of the university's efforts to go beyond the classroom and lead the charge in applying AI to real-world challenges.

"We are not using AI simply because it is available. We deploy AI where it sharpens human judgment, strengthens resilience and addresses real problems."

As the digital age matures, SMU has spent the last few years overhauling its policies and redesigning assessments to ensure academic integrity. With that in the works, the university is now increasingly looking outward.

From eldercare to workforce resilience, the university is positioning itself at the forefront of research that solves societal problems, while keeping one principle non-negotiable: human centricity, says Prof Chan.

In the professor's first sit-down interview with media, he tells The Straits Times how SMU maintains this principle in its stakeholder relations, its new policies and frameworks for students and educators, and how it seeks to lead the charge to harness the potential of AI.

Q *In 2025, there were high-profile plagiarism cases of students using AI for assignments. As a provost, how do you manage the line between using AI as a tool and maintaining independence in learning? If a degree is "outsourced" to AI, what is the point of a university?*
A We view AI as a technology to enhance education, not replace it. Our goal is for students to learn about AI, learn to use AI and learn with AI, but, most importantly, to learn beyond AI.

While AI is a powerful tool, overreliance can hinder metacognitive development – the ability to understand one's own thought processes.

This is why we are doubling down on human-centred competencies: critical thinking, ethical judgment and communication. We don't want students to treat AI as a separate course; we want them to "critically interrogate" the AI throughout their entire learning process.

What this looks like is our instructors integrating AI into assessments. For example, asking students to critique an AI-generated response. If AI can generate an answer in seconds, our role is to ask better questions. Class sizes are kept small, and we are seeing more in-class assessments without internet, or questions that require personal experience and specific cases discussed in class.

SMU provost Alan Chan says the university is positioning itself at the forefront of research that solves societal problems, while human centricity remains non-negotiable. "We deploy AI where it sharpens human judgment, strengthens resilience and addresses real problems," he says. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

About Professor Alan Chan

Professor Alan Chan has been the provost of SMU since April 2025. In his role, he leads university academic strategy, including research, education and strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration, while also contributing as a faculty member.

Under Prof Chan's leadership over the past year, the university has prioritised the integration of "human-centred" AI into its educational launching frameworks to adapt pedagogy and assessment for the digital age. He has also championed impactful research collaborations and the establishment of the SMU Resilient Workforces Institute.

Prior to joining SMU, Prof Chan was provost and pro-vice-chancellor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where he also held the chair of J.S. Lee Professor of Chinese Culture.

He has held significant leadership roles at Nanyang Technological University, where he was vice-president and dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, and at the National University of Singapore as associate provost (undergraduate education) and vice-dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

He is a renowned scholar in Chinese philosophy and religion, having published widely on Confucianism and Daoism, including contributions to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. He is also a recipient of the Teaching Excellence Award and has a developed global online course that has reached over 10,000 learners worldwide.

Prof Chan serves as a member on the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong. He holds a PhD in religious studies from the University of Toronto.

For assessment, the university draws a clear line: AI is not allowed to be used to grade work that contributes to the final grade. For now, that still requires professorial judgment.

Q *How has SMU reviewed its curriculum and assessments over the last few years to keep up with these changes?*
A We work on building foundations at Year 1 and disciplinary integration from Year 2 onwards. For fresh batches, we focus on "discipline of mind" to ensure students don't develop bad habits early on.

Students currently have exposure to courses on digital technologies, and SMU will be developing a mandatory course on AI fluency that equips students with a deeper understanding of AI.

Our assessment frameworks have shifted from the detection of AI to adaptation and integration. We examine a key question: Does the assessment measure reasoning and ethical discernment – or does it merely measure endurance?

This has resulted in more oral defences, live builds and simulations where students must explain where the AI's limits lie.

Q *How does SMU balance the exploration of AI with the need for academic rigour?*
A SMU has adopted a three-pronged AID framework:

- Adapt: Supporting instructors to redesign assessments that focus on deeper thinking and formats that AI tools cannot easily complete.
- Incorporate: Encouraging the use of AI tools with explicit guidelines for when and how they should be used.
- Detect: Using tools to identify potential misuse, though we recognise these are not foolproof.

We place significantly more emphasis on "Adapt" and "Incorporate". When potential cases of unauthorised use arise, we review them holistically using academic judgment and direct engagement with the student.

Students are given the opportunity to explain their thinking and working process, and decisions are made carefully, recognising that AI tools can produce false signals and that learning contexts vary.

I don't worry about my younger colleagues; they already know so much. I worry about colleagues of my "vintage".

But we provide extensive faculty development for differentiated levels of AI expertise through our Centre for Teaching Excellence, like webinars and training sessions, to ensure all faculty are supported.

Q *You mentioned SMU is looking outward. How is the university using AI to impact society?*
A When we think about deploying AI across the university, including beyond teaching and learning, we start by asking: Where does AI genuinely help humans think and decide better, and where must judgment remain firmly human?

As a university, we are heavily focused on impact. One example is the earlier mentioned collaboration with Sengkang General Hospital.

Another example is our collaboration with IBM Research, using AI to mitigate global supply chain risks. These models help procurement teams evaluate trade-offs and make better decisions during volatile times, using AI to assist human judgment rather than replace it. We have also launched the "Resilient Workforce" agenda in August 2025, and our research interests have extended beyond the AI tools that people are using, to focus on how AI is reshaping cognition, collaboration and learning.

One such project under this agenda is faculty Professor Li Jia's project to develop an exposure index on AI use in different professions, where the index can identify when AI works alongside people and when it replaces human work.

Q *In the future, everyone will know AI. What will make an SMU graduate stand out?*
A The mantra used to be that people who know AI will replace those who don't. But soon, everyone will know it. The real distinction will be between those who use AI with critical discernment and those who don't.

If you cannot demonstrate a "human value-add"– through ethical judgment, complex decision-making and original thinking – you can be replaced. We want our students to be "co-creators of knowledge" rather than passive consumers of AI outputs.

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