

Higher education must sharpen human judgment and problem framing, say ST forum panellists

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Two years ago, humanoid robots were a novelty on stage. Today, they are a reminder of how quickly artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from spectacle to substance.

That acceleration has forced a deeper realisation, addressed by panellists at The Straits Times Education Forum 2026 on April 1, that as AI becomes more embedded in daily life, education must move beyond simply imparting knowledge to developing deeper human capabilities such as judgment and resilience.

“Ultimately, what we want is to be able to... help our children and our young people to learn deeply... to be able to imbibe knowledge, adapt it, apply, and be critical about it,” said Education Minister Desmond Lee, one of the three panellists.

He added that education must also hone values such as judgment, empathy and cross-cultural competency, more than just the intellect.

The panel – which also comprised Mr Raghav Gupta, head of education for Asia-Pacific at OpenAI, and Singapore Management University provost Alan Chan – highlighted the need to shift from broad knowledge acquisition to deeper, more applied expertise.

The discussion centred on a critical evolution: As AI masters “horizontal” tasks – general capabilities like writing and summarising – human success will depend on “vertical” expertise.

The panel was moderated by Professor Lim Sun Sun, SMU’s vice-president of partnerships and engagement and Lee Kong Chian Professor of Communication and Technology.

Mr Lee said that while AI is an incredible tool, it must not become a shortcut. He used the legal profession to illustrate the difference between machine execution and human expertise.

“These tools allow lawyers to generate submissions for a case... but the senior lawyer, having gone

through the rigmarole and the rigour of legal training and legal practice, will look at the submission and say, ‘Will this fly in front of the judge, and will it fly in front of this judge, given his or her temperament?’

“If you say, ‘Well, if that can be done by an AI tool, then I don’t even need to go for the rigour of legal training’, I think that will be a big mistake,” he added.

This also reshapes the role of universities. Rather than being the primary source of knowledge, they must now focus on helping students apply knowledge, exercise agency and understand what society needs.

Mr Gupta noted that AI is moving at a rapid pace, with per capita usage in Singapore being high as well.

“But we’re all seeing personal productivity gains,” he said. “Only some of us are seeing gains at the productivity level in teams... and very few countries are seeing it at the societal level or a country level. “Technology is evolving very

quickly, but there’s a lot to be done when it comes to diffusion of that technology, to really have productive impact.”

This is where universities come in. More than building social connections, they help to build human skills and critical thinking.

“Skills like problem solving are shifting to problem framing, because AI can help you possibly solve that problem once you’ve framed it correctly,” Mr Gupta added.

Professor Chan said university education will continue to play a very important role in cultivating some habits and discipline of the mind, and SMU has been emphasising the importance of cultivating fundamental human-centred capabilities.

“But at the same time, we mustn’t forget that we are also trying to help our students to navigate an increasingly fractious world,” he said.

“We mustn’t forget that the external conditions, the external environment, is also changing very

quickly, and that will require a lot of human skills in order to achieve the kind of harmonious society.”

Prof Chan said that without a firm grounding in core concepts, students risk becoming passive consumers.

He likened the discipline of learning to gongfu, noting that students need the fundamentals before mastering other areas.

“Without fundamentals, I think – or I fear at least – that many students will simply be driven by what comes out next, without really questioning the validity or the value of such tools,” Prof Chan said.

“The role of education is, to me, precisely to ensure that the relationship between human beings and technology will remain a beneficial one,” he added.

The panel agreed that as the automation of knowledge acquisition accelerates, the new goal of education is “learning beyond AI” – focusing on traits like critical inquiry and ethical discernment.

Resilience, in particular, was identified as the indispensable skill for the future, panellists said.

Mr Lee, recalling a conversation on the focus for educators, said: “You can have the best academic mind, but if you don’t have the steel of resilience... when the workplace

changes, when the industry sunsets suddenly, and you can’t adapt, then I think that will not go well.”

To address this, his ministry will involve partners, students and researchers in a series of “honest conversations” to rethink the educational “arms race”.

“We want to... think about ways in which we can reduce the arms race without diminishing motivation and drive to learn and to excel,” he said. By doing so, the system can place more emphasis on character and adaptability in an age where change is “faster than ever”.

“With AI’s opportunity and impact, we think it’s even more important to double down on those efforts,” Mr Lee said.

The panel discussion ended on a note of cautious optimism. Noting the risk of “autocratic AI” controlled by a few, Mr Gupta said the hope remains that the technology can be democratised to solve fundamental human needs in health-care and education.

Mr Lee added: “Our greatest fear is if AI hobbles us, clouds our judgment and it becomes the master... The greatest hope is that it augments humanity and empowers us to be even more.”

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