

Address by SMU President Prof Lily Kong

Launch of the SMU Longevity Societies and Economies Institute (LSEI)

14 April 2026, 9.20am, Marina Bay Sands

Minister Indranee Rajah

Colleagues and partners

Distinguished guests

A very good morning to all of you.

It is my pleasure to join Ageing Asia and our partners today for the launch of the Silver Economy Report, and for this very important gathering focused on the rise of longevity societies.

In an SR Nathan Lecture series dedicated to the study of Singapore, I had spoken about the 100-year life. I would like to return to that idea this morning, because how we understand it will shape how we respond.

The 100-year life is sometimes heard as a countdown; a ticking demographic clock. It is framed as a problem of fiscal sustainability, of healthcare capacity and ageing dependency ratios. These concerns are real, and should not be minimised. But a longer life is not simply time extended; it should be seen as possibility extended. And that distinction – between more years and more possibility – will determine whether longevity

becomes an era of genuine human flourishing or simply a more expensive version of what we already have.

The question I find myself returning to is this: *are our institutions keeping pace with the lives we are living now?*

Many of them I would suggest are perhaps not. We have designed economies and thus societies around a three-stage life – learn, earn, retire – that no longer describes how many people actually live. We have built systems that still treat later life primarily as a phase of care and cost; escalators move a little too fast; digital forms that assume one has an employer; font sizes no one quite asked for; and retirement policies written when 65 was perhaps considered a long life indeed. Taken together, they communicate something: the designed world could afford to catch up with the lived world. Many of us still adjust to the news that we are living to 90 – and indeed 100 – intending to remain very curious, productive and engaged for much of it.

This is the gap that the Longevity Societies and Economies Institute (LSEI) that SMU is establishing today seeks to close.

LSEI brings together SMU's strengths across social sciences, law, computing and business – because longevity is genuinely too complex for any single discipline to hold. The Institute is led by my colleagues Prof Paulin Tay Straughan and Dr Cheong Wei Yang as Co-Directors — two individuals who have spent their careers studying and practicing

exactly this terrain, and whose leadership gives LSEI both intellectual rigour and practical reach from day one.

LSEI has two major pillars, and I will share more about why they are paired.

The first is **Building Longevity Economies**. It asks what it means to redesign economic life for longer life courses. How do labour markets recognise the value of experience, of judgment, and institutional memory? Such capacities tend to compound over time, rather than diminish. How do we manage the real costs of ageing societies sustainably, without reducing the problem to cost containment? And what does the silver economy actually look like beyond care services and digital products that often treat older users as an afterthought?

The second pillar is **Cultivating Holistic Well-being**. This asks how individuals actually experience longer lives. Not in the abstract, but in everyday terms: maintaining friendships, navigating environments, sustaining cognitive ability and vitality when routines loosen, and maintaining financial security across a lifespan that few systems were designed to accommodate.

These two pillars are not parallel tracks, they are inseparable. A longevity economy depends on those who are well and engaged to participate meaningfully; just as sustained, holistic well-being depends on economic structures that provide security and opportunity across the full arc of life.

Importantly, LSEI builds on strong empirical foundations already established at SMU. The Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA) – led by Prof Paulin Tay Straughan – with its Singapore Life Panel, has tracked a large cohort of more than 10,000 Singaporeans just for over a decade. This longitudinal dataset is rare and deeply valuable. It allows us to move beyond abstract debate, to understanding ageing as it is lived — in everyday decisions, in relationships, and in environments. And this, in turn, enables more thoughtful and effective policy and programme design. Good research on longevity requires this kind of patience and rigour, and we are fortunate to have it.

Today, we also formalise partnerships with Workforce Singapore, Agency for Integrated Care, Singlife, Lions Befrienders and St Luke’s Eldercare through MOUs signed this morning. They span key domains through which longevity is experienced — work and economic participation, financial security, as well as community-based care and social connection. These collaborations matter because research on age-inclusive employment, reskilling pathways, retirement readiness and holistic well-being can find its way into policies and programmes that shape the lives of Singaporeans. We look forward to deepening these partnerships.

This commitment to real-world impact is also reflected in today’s City Dialogues, SMU’s platform that curates conversations among global academics, policymakers, and industry leaders to generate actionable insights for sustainable and inclusive urban development. It carries a theme which is well-chosen: *Investing in Longevity: Healthy Living, Purposeful Ageing, and Ageing in Place* which captures the important shift.

Healthy living reminds us that the path to successful longevity begins long before old age. Purposeful ageing recognises that longer lives should expand opportunities for contribution. And ageing in place underscores the importance of environments — physical, social, and institutional — that support belonging and dignity. Through platforms like City Dialogues, LSEI intends to be a convener, bringing together government, industry, and academia not only to exchange ideas, but to co-create practical solutions that follow from them.

LSEI's work is also integral to SMU's broader Impact Agenda which is a part of our SMU2030 strategic plan. Our aspiration is to pursue bold ideas for real impact, in Singapore and across Asia. Longevity provides one of the clearest lenses through which this ambition finds expression. Together with our Urban Institute and the Resilient Workforces Institute (ResWORK), LSEI represents one of our most committed institutional expressions of our impact agenda. Together, the three institutes will address how we live – through the Urban Institute, how we work – through the resilient workforces Institute, and how we age – through LSEI.

Let me close by returning to the idea of the countdown.

A 100-year life gives us something we rarely have: time. More time to contribute, more time to adapt, to learn, to build, to pivot, and remain useful in ways we had not yet anticipated. The question is whether our societies are designed to support this, or whether we will have to spend the next generation managing the gap between the lives we are living and wish to live, and the institutions we have inherited.

Minister, distinguished guests, partners — we look forward to working with you in this shared endeavour. Thank you.

[1,157 words | 10 minutes]