

ST Education Forum 2024 The AI Revolution: Are you ready for it?

Should AI be used to select students for universities?

In this third of a four-part series on the AI revolution, Sandra Davie talks to Singapore Management University provost Timothy Clark about how AI will impact higher education.

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WHAT

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TOPIC

The AI Revolution: Are You Ready For It?

WHEN

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SMU provost says AI could perpetuate biases and schools may miss out on some students

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The Singapore Management University (SMU), which was the first university in Singapore to introduce personal statements for undergraduate admissions in 2000, will be doing away with them in 2024 because of ChatGPT.

Students who are applying for places in 2024 are being asked to give short responses to four questions, such as why they want to join the university that enrolled more than 2,500 first-year undergraduate students in 2023, the largest incoming cohort in SMU's history. SMU provost Timothy Clark said that in 2023, the university admissions office asked some of its staff to use ChatGPT, the artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot, to write personal statements. The staff found them to be "rather good". So SMU decided to switch to asking applicants to respond to a series of short questions. Several other universities, both local and overseas, have also done away with personal statements for admissions.

Although some students interviewed admitted they may still use ChatGPT to help them answer the questions, Professor Clark advised students against using any sort of AI tools to craft their answers.

"They will be doing a disservice to themselves and affecting their chances of getting into SMU. We pose those specific questions because we want to understand the character, aspirations and motivations of a student. It will help us determine whether SMU is the right fit for them," he said.

Just as AI is being used to make the first round of cuts for job applications, some universities around the world are also looking at whether AI can be used to select students. The University of Texas at Austin, for one, experimented with using AI to support the evaluation of its computer science PhD candidates, only to abandon it seven years later upon realising that it might reinforce existing stereotypes.

Prof Clark stated categorically that SMU is not considering using AI to screen students for admissions.

He said: "It goes against the very personalised and individualised approach that we take when it comes to admissions. We read every application. We look at their CCAs (co-curricular activities) in the school and outside. Some 70 per cent are shortlisted and asked to come for an interview. So really, we are looking at the potential of the candidate. If we use some kind of AI tool, the danger is that we may miss out on students who actually would have a successful experience with us."

"AI systems trained on historical data can perpetuate biases. AI cannot duplicate the nuance of a human conversation that might reveal insights into the applicant."

But he agreed that well-developed AI tools can make the admissions process more efficient.

SMU, like many universities, uses chatbots on its admissions pages to answer frequently asked questions and to be able to provide support 24/7. Applicant tracking systems are now powered with AI so applicants can be sent personalised reminders about deadlines and invitations to open houses.

Prof Clark goes on to talk about the other opportunities, as well as threats that AI poses to higher education institutions.

Q What was the immediate reaction from the SMU community when ChatGPT was launched in November 2022? Did the university consider banning students from using ChatGPT?

A Yes, the release of ChatGPT did send some colleges and universities scrambling. There was a sense of a herd reaction around the world. As provost, I stressed to the faculty that it was important not to get caught up in the moment... to move beyond and see where we are likely to land in the future.

The first thing we did was to send a holding message to students, to let them know that we are studying the ChatGPT technology and assessing the implications of it for teaching and learning. We also reminded students about our code of conduct and the importance of academic integrity.

In parallel, we set up a small working group to think through the implications of ChatGPT. The dominant global discourse and approach at the time was around de-



SMU provost Timothy Clark says the university intends to position students well for a future that is irrevocably intertwined with AI. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

About Professor Timothy Clark

Professor Timothy Clark has been provost of the Singapore Management University (SMU) since April 2019. In his role, he has undertaken a range of initiatives aimed at enhancing the distinctive DNA of SMU's education and the impact of its research.

These initiatives have included launching the College of Integrative Studies, the College of Graduate Research Studies, the SMU Academy's Industry Practice Master and the SMU Master of Sustainability.

Under Prof Clark's leadership, the university has also launched a number of significant research

initiatives including its Centre for Research on Successful Ageing and the Singapore Green Finance Centre, a collaboration with Imperial College London.

Prior to joining SMU, Prof Clark was pro-vice-chancellor (social sciences and health) at Durham University, United Kingdom.

He is a former general editor of the Journal of Management Studies and was both the chair and president of the British Academy of Management.

He is also a fellow of the British Academy of Management and the Academy of Social Sciences.

tion and around cheating; and not around the opportunities from an educational point of view that came with ChatGPT.

So, the knee-jerk reaction from many universities was to ban ChatGPT. That is just impossible. Our view is that we have to find a way to actively engage with AI and teach our students to engage with it. At the same time, we relooked our policies, to ensure they would bolster academic integrity.

Q So, in what way did the faculty adapt the assessments? And what about incorporating AI into the curriculum? After all, it is here to stay.

A The first thing we did was to adapt assessments, just as we did when Covid-19 led to lockdowns. The Centre for Teaching Excellence started providing training courses and working with individual faculty members to help them

rework their assessments.

With ChatGPT, we asked faculty to put their questions through the platform and to see what it produces and whether it is a concern. We also asked faculty to talk to the students about what kind of results ChatGPT produces.

Ultimately, faculty had to ensure that ChatGPT, or any AI system, cannot undermine assessments.

This is not a new challenge, but rather a constant one, whether it be ChatGPT or essay writing services. We need to ensure students know the importance of authenticity and integrity of their work.

Another important part was incorporating AI into the curriculum. We cannot ignore the reality that generative AI tools like ChatGPT will become integral to their work in many fields.

So, SMU School of Computing and Information Systems gets students to understand and work with

large language models and even involves them in building large language models.

The law school, too, recognises that AI is already being used by law firms in tasks such as drafting and editing documents and conducting research. The challenge for legal educators is to prepare students for this new reality while still teaching them the fundamental skills they need to be effective lawyers.

We focus on AI literacy. What we want are students who have an understanding of the technical aspects of AI, know how to use the tools and platforms, be able to identify the strengths and limitations of these systems, and understand how to use such tools in effective, ethical and responsible ways.

Q What about research related to AI?

A SMU, as a research-intensive university, prioritises research that addresses societal challenges.

Let me give you one example - the Centre for AI and Data Governance that SMU set up in 2019, to conduct independent research on policy, regulatory, governance, ethics and other issues relating to AI and data use. The centre forms part of a national ecosystem that drives the development of responsible AI in Singapore.

One of the important areas it is addressing is on data bias, specifically, in identification technologies that may draw discriminatory conclusions based on race and gender. This is crucial in the development of ethical AI systems.

Q What about AI literacy for the general public?

A We have developed a whole suite of courses and certificates to help with the upskilling of the Singaporean population in relation to AI.

We are currently running a total of 31 certificate programmes designed to explore the various facets of AI, and to date, the SMU Academy has trained approximately 2,000 participants through these courses annually.

Q How do you think universities will be using AI five or 10 years down the road?

A I think AI tools will be much more developed and used by universities.

I foresee the use of AI in personalised learning systems. In fact, SMU is already developing a personalised learning tool - a course recommendation system that will enable students to make much more informed choices that will help them access the careers they want in the future.

It will also be able to identify where there are learning gaps and recommend the appropriate courses to plug those gaps.

To sum up, we intend to position students well for a future that is irrevocably intertwined with AI. Generative AI is here to stay, and a university education done right can make all the difference in a world infused with such innovations.

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