

Facing up to challenges in higher education

Universities around the world are having tough conversations on how to deal with challenges in education, but changes will take time, said two seasoned education administrators yesterday.

There are hurdles in changing traditional methods of teaching but more institutions are rethinking the way their students are learning, said SIM Holdings chief executive Lee Kwok Cheong at a panel discussion.

Technology is changing the way people gather information, said Mr Lee, citing the example of working adults choosing topics they want to learn from the wide range of courses offered by online education platform Coursera.

“Universities do innovate, they do make a lot of internal changes, and they do try to stay relevant,” he said.

Universities are here to stay but Mr Lee raised the reality that they are slow-moving, costly to run and subject to external regulators.

Sharing Mr Lee’s view, Dr Charles Zukoski, provost of the University at Buffalo, New York, said faculty members – who are often resistant to change – have to reshape their teaching to cater to a new generation of students, many of whom are digital natives.

While the desire for higher education has never been stronger, costs of running traditional four-year degree programmes – developed in the 19th century – are going up, he said.

“We’re now in the 21st century... Now we’re talking about expanding education to a larger fraction of the population,” said Dr Zukoski, who is also University at Buffalo’s executive vice-president for academic affairs.

He foresees alternative forms of education being offered to cater to demand, such as shorter degrees or other types of credentials.

And as jobs get disrupted and redefined, the skills that employers look for are changing, and schools need to prepare students for this.

For instance, students will need to learn more skills in communication, study more about culture and history, and have more experiences out of classrooms, said Dr Zukoski.

He cited the example of law students at the University at Buffalo who are posted to local hospitals to speak to families.

The initiative trains them to respond to real-life problems, instead of answering model legal questions, he said.

Amelia Teng



Taking a question at the Disruptions in Education (DisruptED) forum yesterday are (from left) Ms Lydia Lim, The Straits Times’ head of training and development; Dr Charles Zukoski, provost and executive vice-president for academic affairs at the University at Buffalo, New York; and Mr Lee Kwok Cheong, chief executive of SIM Holdings. PHOTO: LIN ZHAOWEI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Uni model should develop critical, creative thinking

Founder of innovative US school tells forum that traditional teaching method is ‘broken’

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

The traditional university model should be shaken up because it does not effectively train students to apply their knowledge and skills across contexts, said the founder of an American school that has reinvented the college experience.

The model should be replaced by one that truly develops critical and creative thinking, said Mr Ben Nelson, chief executive officer of the Minerva Project.

“The way in which universities teach is proven scientifically to be broken,” he said.

“When you have an individual who learns certain habits within a context... no matter how good of a critical thinker they are in their field, they are not able to transfer that knowledge to anything else.

“The nature of work and society... is to be able to translate what we learn from various aspects of our lives into new contexts,” said Mr Nelson.

The 43-year-old entrepreneur

was speaking yesterday at a forum, Disruptions in Education (DisruptED). It was co-organised by The Straits Times and the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM). About 400 people attended the forum at the SIM Global Education campus.

Founded in 2012, Minerva – whose headquarters is in San Francisco – offers a four-year tertiary education. Instead of classroom lessons, seminars of up to 20 students are conducted online.

Students spend the first year studying foundational concepts that make up critical and creative thinking – such as logic – through problem-solving tasks.

For instance, they could be tasked to think of solutions to high school attrition in a city.

In the next three years, they apply these elements to different majors such as computational science or arts and humanities.

The university requires students to live and study in up to seven cities in a bid to immerse them in different cultures.

Mr Nelson said the students scored the highest in the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a standardised test that evaluates skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving.

Another speaker, Ms Kristina Kai-



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DR JANIL PUTHUCHEARY,
Senior Minister of State for Education, and Communications and Information, on learning in the face of disruptions.

hari, counsellor of education at the Finnish National Agency for Education, said Finland has broken moulds in its education system by focusing on learning through play in the first six years of a child’s life.

Children also learn about history, science and mathematics from their natural surroundings such as forests, said Ms Kaihari. This is to help them “understand, not just remember, things”, she added.

Guest of honour Janil Puthuchery, Senior Minister of State for Education, and Communications and Information, said the Education Ministry is encouraging new models of teaching and learning in the face of disruptions.

But there are downsides, such as a less efficient system.

“There’s not going to be a guarantee that every experiment, every disruptive innovation that we try in the education service may work perfectly the first time,” said Dr Janil.

“We need to prepare our students for a different kind of world. We need to build in them resilience and adaptability... If you need to try something and fail, then try something different, that’s OK.”

Newsrooms are also changing the way they work, said Mr Warren Fernandez, editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings’ English/Malay/Tamil Media group and editor of The Straits Times.

“We have transformed the way we operate, the way we think, into being a fully multimedia operation,” he said.

Disruption has brought with it both challenges and opportunities, he said, from having to chase digital advertising, to people realising the value of quality journalism with the spread of fake news.

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