

Singapore universities consider setting up dedicated facilities for lifelong learning

By Hetty Musfirah Abdul Khamid | Posted: 26 Jun 2015 20:03 | Updated: 26 Jun 2015 22:39

This was one of the ideas discussed at the 10th International Academic Advisory Panel chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, where it was also suggested that local universities be key stakeholders in the SkillsFuture movement.

SINGAPORE: Each university in the Republic will look into setting up a dedicated facility to drive and lend more structure to lifelong learning programmes. They should also study how to better evaluate the outcomes and effectiveness of learning. Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said these were some issues highlighted as the 10th International Academic Advisory Panel wrapped up its meeting on Friday (Jun 26).

The panel, chaired by Mr Tharman, provides advice on the major trends and directions in university education. It is made up of 13 other members who are distinguished leaders in academia and industry from around the world.

During the meeting, members expressed strong support for Singapore's emphasis on lifelong learning and innovation under the SkillsFuture movement. They also supported the offering of bite-sized modules and felt Singapore universities can be key stakeholders in SkillsFuture. One way is to set up a dedicated outfit in each university to provide clear direction to lifelong learners of varying needs and interests.

Mr Tharman said: "They shared with our own universities that the best way of organising this, given that it's a long run journey, is to do it on a dedicated basis - not something that is part of the regular work of existing faculties and departments, but something like a dedicated facility within the university."

NEED FOR DEDICATED FACILITIES

"There are a few reasons for that," Mr Tharman said. "First, admission into continual learning programmes will be on a very different basis compared to your regular undergraduate programmes. It is not going to be based on cut-off points and the usual academic criteria. It will be much more fluid and flexible, much more open."

He added: "Second, the type of credentials you get also on completing a module or a course will be quite different, much more market driven and to be really tested in the market, so the credentials won't always be the same as what you obtain in a traditional university education."

"Third, the faculty themselves could be quite different; it would involve some people from the faculty but also involve people from outside, professionals, industry practitioners. It will be much broader based on teachers that the universities will draw on."

Mr Tharman said that Singapore universities feel they can play "a larger role in society", reaching out to more potential learners, including graduates of other local and foreign universities, as well as those who do not have university degrees but "want to learn a particular skill, a particular module or upgrade and potentially get a degree".

According to Mr Tharman, to ensure that the lifelong learning programmes provide real value for Singaporeans, universities may potentially advise "members of the public regardless of their backgrounds on how you can go about adding things up so that (their) knowledge accumulates, (their) skills accumulate and (they) can get some recognition".

PLANS ALREADY UNDERWAY

The National University of Singapore (NUS) will set up such a dedicated unit this year. It will take on a multidisciplinary approach, where professors from different faculties are involved in delivering courses which are in line with industry needs.

"If we look at NUS for example, we have been doing continuing and professional education for quite a long time, particularly in the professional schools," said NUS president Professor Tan Chorh Chuan.

"So in schools like law, medicine and business, this has been a norm and there is a lot of support for professionals. What we need to do going forward is to extend this to other disciplines and courses that traditionally do not have a strong tradition of lifelong learning and continuing education," he added.

Prof Tan said that while NUS sees the need to create a separate unit, it is still part of the university, but will be different in a few ways: "It will try to understand what is the need, what is the industry looking for, what are the skills mismatches among people who are interested in taking courses. This understanding is very important because we need to be responsive to the needs within the industry sector."

The Singapore Institute of Technology will have its unit ready next year.

The panel said universities should also develop soft skills that will be important in the working world and an appreciation of the links between disciplines, such as between arts and sciences among undergraduates.

Mr Tharman said the panel also felt that Singapore can be a leader in evaluating and ensuring effectiveness of lifelong learning.

"That is very important to the individual, to the Singaporean," he said. "We are making available a much broader range of learning opportunities throughout life. We are putting some money into it. You will be getting SkillsFuture Credit, you will be getting subsidies, it has to be something that adds value to the individual."

He added: "It may be to develop a new interest but very often, it's to develop your career, to develop deeper skills at work or to develop skills for an altogether new career. But it has to add value and to do this, we need constant evaluation of the effectiveness of what we are doing."



File photo of the campuses of NUS and NTU.