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ST-SMU Future of Education

Industry-varsity co-op schemes set to kick off

A closer synergy between industry and two of Singapore's universities, which will see undergraduates study and then move to firms for practical experience, is set to kick off as early as next year.

This was revealed by Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung during his keynote speech at The Straits Times Education Forum 2016 at Singapore Management University (SMU).

These pilot "cooperative programmes" will be led by the Singapore Institute of Technology and SIM University, and they will partner organisations including Singtel, Singapore Power, The Ascott, CapitaLand and Standard Chartered, in addition to government agencies

like the Defence Science and Technology Agency and the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore.

"As the name implies, it is a cooperation between universities and industries, where students spend half or more of their time at the workplace, alternating between campus and company on a semestral basis. Many can, in fact, be hired by the company from the outset and are income-earning employee-students throughout the course," said Mr Ong.

He stressed that it was important for institutes of higher learning to help students build up soft skills, which include working in teams and across cultures, and being able to communicate and negotiate well – skills which industry leaders have

told him are lacking in Singapore students.

But such skills are best acquired through practice, which is why schools are increasingly focusing on real-life learning, and the introduction of the new co-op schemes, which will require more commitment from participating firms than in usual internship programmes.

"Increasingly, education is a joint effort between institutions and industry players," said Mr Ong, who added that his ministry will work hard at making sure that the cooperative programmes obtain sufficient support across all levels of the partner organisations, so that they can be effective and successful.

Standard Chartered said that it has plans to recruit 40 apprentices. It may also send them on short-term assignments at the bank's shared services hubs in places like India and China.

Besides building skills, Mr Ong said institutes of higher learning must also continue to update themselves in how they impart know-



ledge, such as through new platforms like flipped classrooms that focus on active discussion and collaboration in class, and establish a distinct identity rooted in the national context that can help shape Singapore society.

He called on them to lead and not react to changes in technology and industry, citing Britain's recent vote to exit from the European Union as an example of how even major institutions could find themselves caught on the

wrong side of change.

Through providing quality education, they can continue to be a social force that can "narrow or even erase privileges of birth and wealth".

Yuen Sin

Mr Ong Ye Kung interacting with students before The Straits Times Education Forum 2016, with ST editor Warren Fernandez behind him.

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