

EDUCATION

Professor Jan Thomas, vice-chancellor of New Zealand's Massey University, believes that universities will be of better quality and more diversified in the future to cater to the evolving needs of students.
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Satisfying the unquenchable thirst for higher learning

Universities must combine academic and real-life experiences to stay relevant: Prof

Yuen Sin

As information and technology continue to proliferate, the question that universities will have to contend with is not how they can prepare their graduates for employment, but whether they are preparing them to create jobs.

Singapore has had foresight in being an early adopter of this approach of cultivating a sound ecosystem for entrepreneurship, said Professor Jan Thomas, vice-chancellor of New Zealand's Massey University, one of the biggest providers of distance and online learning in the country.

Speaking to The Straits Times on her first visit to Singapore as a representative of Massey last week, Prof Thomas said that such a shift towards encouraging an entrepreneurial culture in universities would involve more intersections with "non-traditional" sources of learning. These could range from workplaces and community spaces to government organisations.

A "didactic" model where teachers dispense wisdom and knowledge to students would become less relevant in an age where access to information has become democratised. Instead, universities will become more like curators and conductors of a student's learning environment, putting together insight that can come from academics, but also providing opportunities for learning in settings like workplaces.

Currently, disciplines like medicine or dentistry have been "doing well" in terms of giving students exposure to both academia and the real world. But such experiences also need to be translated to other disciplines, such as political science or philosophy, so that students do not just study the subject in isolation, said Prof Thomas, who also chairs the Managing Council of the Association of Commonwealth Universities in Britain.

A university programme offered by Massey in collaboration with the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) – the SIT-Massey University joint degree programme in food technology – is an example of how learning at university can spill over into other areas. Besides regular lessons, students also attend

thinking that is expected of a university graduate. So you're actually not separating out universities from the rest of the students' lives."

Prof Thomas believes the best way for universities to remain relevant to students from different demographics, whether they are adult learners or fresh school leavers, is to ensure that every interaction that students have with staff or programmes on campus is a "rich and value-added" one.

In future, a student of philosophy or political science may get similar exposure by working with community organisations, for example, said Prof Thomas.

However, she does not think that the traditional university will be eventually replaced by applied universities. The higher education landscape in developed countries, including Singapore, will continue to diversify to meet evolving needs.

Traditional universities will continue to play a role, such as helping public or private organisations.

"Research (conducted in a traditional university setting) is needed to push the boundaries of knowledge and solve the world's big problems," said Prof Thomas.

But there will also be space for applied research that can make a difference to society, and that works for the mutual benefit of the university and external stakeholders.

"Academics from the traditional university environment can help (students) to find ways to solve problems in the workplace that are evidence-based and scholarly, and that encourage creative, analytical

VIBRANT STUDENT LIFE

We have an obligation to ensure that their experience is so rich that they cannot imagine not having that.

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PROFESSOR JAN THOMAS, vice-chancellor of New Zealand's Massey University, on giving students a first-class experience on campus, such as interacting one-on-one with academics.

Just as how the retail and banking industries have evolved to provide a range of services, so will universities become institutions that are not just "one-size-fits-all" entities.

Some traditional ways of doing things will remain, but there will be universities that will look and feel different to match a more diversified student population.

And they will work with a range of organisations, from global entities to for-profit companies and government institutions.

She said: "The next generation of students is going to expect a lot more out of their universities and we have to respond to it."

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