

Smart Education

written by Sheryl Khor

What will it be like, living and learning in a Smart City? What balance can we strike between technology and human skills in the education landscape of the 21st century? How can industries better gear up for this evolution? Four experts in their fields tackle these tough questions and more.

Technology is the obvious anchor in the development of Smart Education, but it is by no means the magic bullet that can solve all future problems. Being 'Smart' in this era of digitalisation is not just about intelligence, it also means defining the thought processes and adaptation of technology in Singapore's unique social and educational context. "We need to think of a Smart Nation in terms of sustainability – Smart doing and the ethical reasons behind it. If you want to innovate, it is not just whether it is financially viable or even technologically feasible. It is also whether it is socially desirable. And that is what education is about," explains Dr Timothy Chan, Director of the Academic and Student Life Divisions, Singapore Institute of Management Global Education (SIM GE).

The benefits of technology are far-reaching, ranging from increased accessibility to customised learning and experiences in the classroom and beyond. Many higher learning institutions like SIM GE and hospitality training school, Dusit Thani College in Thailand have close links with industry partners and incorporate continuous learning programmes for working adults. "Technology in education should not stop at university level as it is a life-long learning experience," says Mr Siradej Donovanik, Director of Investment at Dusit International. "Practical skillsets are becoming more important now than just formal education. We need to focus on using technology to enhance skillsets, and also to have a blended learning approach. Especially in our industry where what we sell is an experience, those individuals who possess the EQ and critical thinking skills are the ones who thrive in our workforce." So, while Smart Education lays the ground for a Smart Nation, which also requires a Smart workforce, the challenge is how to think beyond merely using technology as a means of upgrading.

Thinking Smart

Technology has streamlined and made many of our routine work processes easier, but can it actually help make people smarter? On one hand, Ms Ng Wee Wei, Managing Director, Health and Public Service Client Service Group (ASEAN) of Accenture, believes technology will dramatically change the way we work in the future. "Technology has enabled us to interact with our colleagues around the world, making discussions global and collaborative," she says. "It has the ability to help us reskill and think globally, and even now, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and wearables are already improving the way we learn and do our jobs on a daily basis." At the same time, it is agreed that humans cannot entirely be replaced in an apocalyptic Terminator-like fashion. "The man and machine combination is still evolving – maybe the percentage will change rapidly. But underpinning the technical skills needed for specific professions is the range of uniquely human skills that needs to be developed. Creativity, leadership and analytical thinking—these are the things that will be important," she explains.

Taking it a step further, is all the focus on technology just a red herring? As Ms Agnes Kwek, Executive Director of DesignSingapore Council, highlights, "Technology is important but it doesn't teach us how to think and how to learn. Especially in this age where the jobs that exist today may not exist five years or even five months down the road because of technology. Our role – whether it is in the workforce, or as educators or as the government, is to deliver the ability to learn and re-learn quickly. In the future, we will need people who can deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, because things are changing at an accelerated pace."

In the context of Smart Education today, local educators now understand the



Panellists (from left to right)

Siradej Donovanik
Director of Investment
Dusit International

Ng Wee Wei
Managing Director
Health and Public Service Client Service
Group (ASEAN), Accenture

Dr Timothy Chan
Director
Academic Division and Student Life
Division, SIM Global Education

Agnes Kwek
Executive Director
DesignSingapore Council

Teymoor Nabili
Moderator

importance of this risk-taking or critical mindset, despite the stereotypical notion that Asian-style education leans towards rote learning. Dr Chan describes how in the past, students were often afraid of questioning and making mistakes because there was only one answer that was important—the one that gained them the top score. However, he explains that at the Higher Education level, his students are encouraged to think beyond that one answer and to even challenge or reframe the question itself. Through this process of inquiry, steps are taken in education to better prepare this generation of learners to take risks in this new global economy.

Smart Learning Culture

There is also a need to encourage cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary learning for students to better face a diverse and global economy. "If you look at the current workforce today, we already have four generations in the same workplace, from the baby boomers all the

way to Gen Z –those born in 1995 and after. These people bring to work different expectations and different skillsets," says Ms Ng. "In order to attract the new generation of talent, we do need to reconfigure jobs to allow for more experimentation and collaboration."

Similarly, Ms Kwek stresses the need for technology to always be married with thoughtful design. "The two cannot be separated, critical thinking cannot be separated, and it must always be thought of or used in context," she says. There is thus a need for more customised think tanks to delve into the issues that a Smart Nation will face. Developments such as the Strate Master in Design for Smart Cities programme at SIM GE enables students to thrive in the age of technology through design-thinking and its innovation-based pedagogy. This is one of the many multidisciplinary programmes that the institution offers in a multicultural learning environment.

It remains to be seen, how Smart Education will evolve in Singapore's multicultural and multi-skilled socio-economic landscape. Change and ambiguity are inevitable, and with these come the need for our next generation to be equally well equipped with both technical skills and the social skills to build a truly Smart Nation.

Find out more about the fine balance between technology and uniquely human skills as the four panellists share their thoughts about living and learning in a Smart City.

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