Satisfying the unquenchable thirst for higher learning

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

As information and technology continue to proliferate, the question becomes not how to prepare graduates for employment, but whether they are preparing them for new jobs.

Singapore has foresight in being an early adopter of this approach, providing exposure through entrepreneurship, and Prof Jan Thomas, vice-chancellor of New Zealand’s Massey University, one of the big providers of distance and online learning in the country, feels that his 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 interaction with “non-traditional” sources of learning. These could range from vocational training to distance learning to government organisations.

A “dynamic” model where students can specialise and knowledge is transferred to students would become less relevant in an age where access to information has become democratic and where the world of work becomes more diverse, and a structure of learning environment, putting together insight that can come from academics but also providing opportunities for learning from the workplace, new areas, or other organisations.

“Medicine or dentistry have been doing well” in terms of giving students exposure to both academia and the real world. For experiences also need to be translated to other disciplines, such as political science, where students do not study the subject in lectures, but also learn in the workplace.

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 is an example of how learning at university can spill over into other areas. Besides regular lectures, students also attend practical laboratory and workshop sessions focused on real-life problems and solutions, and get over 20 weeks of work experience as part of the degree programme.

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

However, he said that students also need to see the bigger picture in their studies.

Food science is an example that can contribute to the sustainability of the planet and be a positive force, Prof Thomas said.

The boundaries between online and offline learning are blurring, students who regularly go to a university campus will still need to be there, he said.

Even distance or adult learners who are primarily self-directed can expect to participate in university life in some way, even if it is mostly dropping in to use the library or go to lectures.

Prof Thomas, who was in Singapore to launch an online and distance programme for adult learners, said the programme is designed to meet the needs of those who need flexibility and who cannot commit to full-time learning.

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 bodies.

“University education is about the development of the whole person,” he said.

We have an obligation to ensure that their experience is as rich as they cannot imagine not having that. That calls for academics and administrators to engage them in ways that they can’t be replicated, such as “encumbering them in a structure that allows you to go out and find the things for higher education.”

“More jobs will demand higher capabilities and that needs to be addressed in some way that goes beyond high school education,” he said.