

EVALUATION SHOULD GO BEYOND SALARIES: THARMAN

Tertiary programme outcomes should be assessed, says panel

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SINGAPORE – As the education landscape expands with more continual education and undergraduate course offerings, universities must also evaluate the effectiveness of their programmes.

This was among the points raised by the Ministry of Education's (MOE) International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP), chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, this year.

The IAAP was established in 1997 by the MOE to advise on the direction for Singapore's universities. Meeting once every two to three years, the last panel was convened in 2012. This year's panel comprises 13 other academic leaders from universities in the United States, China and Europe.

Speaking after the end of the IAAP meeting yesterday, Mr Tharman said universities here are in a good position to innovate ways to measure programme outcomes. And this has to go beyond looking at salary levels, such as by studying whether knowledge has been internalised.

Currently, there is the yearly graduate employment survey which details the average salaries earned according

to each discipline and university.

“One obvious thing that people look at is wages, but wages reflect many other things besides the effectiveness of the education you've received,” Mr Tharman said.

Instead, the universities should be evaluating “what do people really understand, what do they retain immediately and what do they retain a few years down the road from what they learnt”, he added.

Such outcomes are important for universities to be able to use the right teaching techniques to help students — some of whom might be adult learners — acquire knowledge.

And even as the Government increases learning opportunities through funding and subsidies, “it has to be something that adds value to the individual”, Mr Tharman said.

He also noted that lessons learnt from evaluating lifelong learning programmes can be applied to undergraduate courses, given the proliferation of study options today, which might vary in quality.

While further studies are needed on the best approaches to measure outcomes, Mr Tharman added that online course providers, for example, allow users to give immediate feedback



for lecturers to adapt their teaching.

Other recommendations made by the IAAP panel included getting universities to create a dedicated lifelong learning unit to drive admissions, collaboration with industry partners and coordination among faculty members.

Citing Boston University and New York University as examples of overseas institutions with separate lifelong learning units, Mr Tharman said a stand-alone entity is recommended as continual learning courses are different from undergraduate programmes.

For instance, admissions would be more flexible and the credentials offered would also differ.

The IAAP also stressed the need for interdisciplinary learning at the undergraduate level so students can pick up both hard and soft skills.

Apart from looking at wages, universities should be evaluating what people really understand, what they retain immediately and what they retain a few years down the road from what they learnt, says DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

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Universities also have to infuse real-world problems into the classrooms, Mr Tharman said.

National University of Singapore (NUS) president Tan Chorh Chuan told reporters a lifelong learning unit at NUS can be expected this year.

He also agreed on the need for a longer-term approach to measure programme outcomes. This includes doing a study on whether getting online learners to enrol and complete a course together at the same pace will improve the motivation to learn.

Singapore Institute of Technology president Tan Thiam Soon is targeting a lifelong learning unit by next year, adding that feedback from industry partners also acts as strong indicators for the quality of its programmes.