



Historian Drew Faust, the president of Harvard University, is committed to improving access to her institution for lower-income students and those from outside the United States. This, Professor Faust says, is her way of "enlisting people in feeling that we have legitimacy, that we are not closed off on some arbitrary basis".
ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG

'Learning should come easily, like breathing'

Harvard University president shares her thoughts on leadership, diversity and change

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In a conversation with outgoing National University of Singapore (NUS) president Tan Chorh Chuan on Tuesday, Harvard University president Drew Faust was struck by how alike their challenges are.

Harvard is ranked the world's sixth-best university, while NUS is 24th globally and Asia's best.

Speaking exclusively to *The Straits Times* after that meeting, Professor Faust said: "I had a great conversation with Chorh Chuan... Here we were, (from universities that are) 9,000 miles (14,500km) apart, and thinking about so many of the same issues. It was overwhelming."

These issues, she added, included lifelong education, data science, what undergraduates expect

of grading and, in general, what students should know to thrive in a future with robots and other forms of pervasive technology.

On the last, Prof Faust mused: "We just ought to let the 11-year-olds run the world because their attitude is 'This is just how it is'. When you're older, it's 'I have to learn this, I have to adjust to it'. But for 11-year-olds, it's like breathing."

She herself was eager to learn more from Singapore on two scores: How data science is evolving at NUS and how Singapore will make its new general education system work.

Her university is revving up "on every level" for the digital future, from creating robotic bees to pollinate plants, to studying the impact of digital media on society, privacy and security. "What we're doing, what we're researching, what we're thinking, is very much informed by

these new circumstances."

Then there are Harvard's 90 online courses, whose topics range from neuroscience to poetry and which are part of a global teaching project that it initiated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Over three million people – half of them outside the United States – have taken the courses, she said.

Asked if she would explore with Singapore institutions the sort of "global international alliances" that are a key prong of Singapore's economy, Prof Faust, 69, said that she would let that happen "naturally" between her individual colleagues and universities here.

She noted how Singapore's top leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong – who has a Master of Public Administration from Harvard – and founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, engaged and advised Harvard for many years.

"That's been extremely important over the years," she stressed, adding that there are about 130 Singaporeans studying on her campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

As to how much of an impact Singaporeans have made on Harvard, she said that they have much to contribute to discussions there, especially on issues like how Singapore deals with traffic congestion, land reclamation and climate change.

Prof Faust became the first woman to head Harvard in 2007 and is celebrating her 10th year this year as its 28th president. Among the biggest feathers in her cap in that time was ensuring that brilliant minds from straitened circumstances have a place at her university, chiefly by increasing financial aid.

As she told *Fast Company* magazine in 2014, one-fifth of her students came from families earning less than US\$65,000 (S\$91,000) a year, with three out of five of them receiving financial aid – up from nearly half (48 per cent) before she became president.

"We try to create a community in which everyone feels that this is a place where they belong and that Harvard belongs to them," she said.

Broadening access to Harvard thus is also her salvo to the increasingly anti-expert and anti-elite. Noting that Harvard's motto is *Veritas* – Latin for "truth" – she said that she is countering the clear "resistance to expertise and facts" today by ex-

tending such financial aid to foreign students too.

About a quarter of Harvard's student population is from outside the US. Continuing to welcome these students, she stressed, is her way of "enlisting people in feeling that we have legitimacy, that we are not closed off on some arbitrary basis".

Embracing diversity is "extremely important" to her too, because she has benefited from it. "The idea that Harvard has a female president would have been unimaginable such a short time ago, and so I embody a kind of change in the community," Prof Faust said.

She said some at Harvard, who might have initially reacted to that change with thoughts like "Umph, a woman. What's this about?", adjusted quickly because they saw that if they helped her to succeed, Harvard would succeed too.

Still, she had other bumps to overcome, which she did by "listening hard" to colleagues and stakeholders. Recalling her first days as president, Prof Faust said: "I could hear little noises like, 'Maybe she's too nice.' I think I've now educated the community that you can be both nice and tough, and that nice is a good thing... Nice and strong are not contradictory."

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ELASTICITY OF YOUNG MINDS

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PROFESSOR DREW FAUST,
Harvard University president.

Fear of foreigners shunning US universities

Harvard University is one of many American universities rattled by United States President Donald Trump's two executive orders banning citizens from up to seven countries with mostly Muslim populations from entering the US for up to 90 days.

On her first trip to Singapore earlier this week for a gathering of more than 400 Harvard alumni from as far as Russia, Harvard's president Drew Faust told *The Straits Times* that these travel bans were "devastating" not only to many international students and scholars, but also to the very idea of a university.

Noting that such "interruptions and impediments" were "very troubling", she said: "I signed petitions along with other presidents to explain why these measures are so devastating to what universities are meant to be, and how they operate."

"But I worry also not just about the particular countries named; I worry about the broader message this sends of unwelcomeness to individuals, be they on campus for days, weeks or years."

Universities, she stressed, were "fuelled by talent" and that "talent comes in so many forms from so many places".

A day after Mr Trump's second executive order, Professor Faust said, Harvard filed an *amicus curiae*, or friend-of-the-court brief, which is a legal document to advise and support a court in New York in a case concerning the travel bans.

While Harvard had not yet seen any drop in international students enrolling with it, Prof Faust noted that other universities were beginning to see signs of that.

She said: "This is the season when we send out our acceptances, so we don't know yet. But there's been evidence from other American universities that there has been a diminution of interest in coming to the US."

Prof Faust declined to name these universities. But *Time* magazine's website *Time.com* reported on March 15 that the University of Washington, which has the 10th highest number of foreign students in the US, had seen a drop, while

private university Adelphi in Long Island was very worried that enrolment might drop.

The report cautioned, however, that US universities would know for sure if enrolment had dropped after the executive orders only when fresh international students arrive in the US in August.

The same report noted two separate surveys that respectively showed a drop in such enrolment and declining interest in studying in the US respectively:

- A survey of 250 American tertiary institutions, released on March 13 by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers, and the Institute of International Education, showed a drop of 39 per cent in foreign student enrolment for the 2017-2018 academic year.
- A survey by higher education consultancy Royall & Co found that one-third of all foreign students polled, who were mostly from the Middle East, North Africa and Canada, were now put off studying in the US. Sixty-nine per cent among them cited the Trump administration as the reason for not wanting to study in the US.

The report added that foreign students contributed US\$36 billion (S\$49 billion) to the US economy – of which US\$500 million was from the six mostly Muslim countries.

Prof Faust stressed: "Let me say to your readers: You are welcome at Harvard and we want you to come. You are necessary to our community and we hope our community will prove supportive and important to many people from all around the globe."

"When we bring people who have had very different experiences, it extends all of our imaginations."

For an idea of how Harvard welcomes its admitted foreign students, check out a video by its internationally diverse T.H. Chan School of Public Health at <https://youtu.be/KXss8hnBO4c>

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