

Institute seeks answers on how technology and cultural factors affect the way people perceive risks and safety



Professor Phoon Kok Kwang speaking at The Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risks' inaugural conference at NUS. PHOTO: NUS

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SINGAPORE - An institute set up to research and educate people on risks - ranging from the terrorism threat to economic uncertainty - will examine the impact of new technology, as well as cultural differences, on the way people perceive risks and safety issues.

The Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk (LRFI), which is based in the National University of Singapore (NUS), will also develop visuals to help the government and other agencies better communicate risks to the public. These initiatives are outlined in the institute's first report - which sets out its research direction and plans - that was released on Thursday (July 27) at an inaugural conference at the university.

The institute hopes to help people more accurately measure risks across many activities, from smoking, to career change, to recreational sports like skydiving.

The report, a collaboration between the foundation and NUS, took about four months to produce. It was done in consultation with an advisory panel comprising twenty international experts from various fields, such as engineering, climate and energy science, and psychology.

The LRFI, located on NUS's Kent Ridge campus, was set up last year (2016) to carry out research and educate people on risks. It seeks to help policymakers, business leaders, scientists and the public make better decisions on safety.

A key focus for the institute, as outlined in the foresight review report, is to study cross-cultural differences in risk perception, with a focus on Asia.

The report noted that "there is little expertise" in different areas of risk in Asia, including natural, social and technological risks. The institute will study future risks, particularly from emerging technologies. For a start, the institute intends to mine local tweets to better understand the issues Singaporeans are anxious.

Another area is in developing new data using digital sources. It aims to work with government ministries and social media companies to develop information and communications technology (ICT) to monitor trends and perceptions and establish data collection. Recognising the importance of public education, the institute will also develop visuals to help the communication of risk to the public.

The LRFI will eventually have about 50 researchers across a broad range of disciplines, from engineering to data analytics. They will tackle problems that cut across sectors and geographical boundaries.

Professor Phoon Kok Kwang, 53, interim director of LRFI, said that the institute's work is pertinent in an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

He cited the recent record temperatures in China, the ongoing terrorism threat and economic and technological change as events that both individuals and the society have to respond to.

"At the institute, our work is not just of academic interest, but also aims to impact the public by educating and communicating ways they can make better decisions. This is important as Singapore is not spared from these global changes and disruptions that are affecting societies worldwide," said Prof Phoon.