University Education

Teaching that learning is a lifelong pursuit

By Su Guaning

Sixty years ago, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) did not exist. Fifty years ago, there was no Republic of Singapore. Forty years ago, humankind first landed on the moon. Thirty years ago, capitalism was still taboo in China. Twenty years ago, the Internet was just a pipe dream. Ten years ago, the phrase “Google it” was yet to be coined. Five years ago, there was no Facebook—and there was no MySpace to Twitter about.

What do all these facts tell us? Knowledge makes possible many inventions, but it also quickly becomes obsolete. The laws of physics do not change, but their applications do—at breakneck speed.

Thus, the role of a university cannot just be about imparting knowledge. We must also instil in our students the desire to learn how to learn, to continually evolve.

Institutions of higher learning too must strive to remain relevant. We must not be mere knowledge providers, but also knowledge creators, generating new ideas that revolutionise the way we live, work and play.

NTU’s predecessor institution Nanyang University—fondly referred to as Nantah—was born out of a desire to be relevant. In particular, by addressing the dilemma of the Chinese-educated.

At that time, there was no local university he or she could attend. Even after Nanyang University was established, its degrees were not recognised by the colonial government and thus many job opportunities were closed to Nantah graduates.

But instead of feeling defeated, many Nantah graduates went overseas to pursue higher degrees. Others went into the private sector, eventually becoming successful entrepreneurs. And some chose to enter politics, helping shape our young nation. To secure their future, they knew they needed to make themselves relevant.

Today’s graduates face a different sort of reality from those early Nantah graduates. While we have done well in providing them with knowledge, how well have we, in equipping them with the relevant skills to ride out a prolonged downturn, such as the one the world is facing now? How can the university “teach” its students to become recession-proof?

I believe possessing the following five attributes will go far in “recession-proofing” our graduates:

First, strong qualities of ethical reasoning, integrity and moral character.

Second, understanding of knowledge, and last and least, experience.

Without integrity, motivation is dangerous. Without motivation, capacity is impotent. Without capacity, understanding is limited. Without understanding, knowledge is meaningless. Without knowledge, experience is blind. Experience is easy to provide and quickly put to good use by people with all the other qualities.

Your time in university is about acquiring knowledge to help you in your chosen career. Do not simply become a passive recipient of knowledge. Understanding should pave the way for you to probe, question and challenge the conventional wisdom imparted to you by your lecturers and tutors. And even after you graduate and take on your first and subsequent jobs, that desire to continually upgrade your knowledge and skills should guide you—through this recession and the ones to come.

The writer is president of Nanyang Technological University. The above is an extract from his address early this month to the Student Network Forum, an annual platform for local and overseas-based students to engage in dialogue with public and private sector leaders.