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Continuing education programmes that cater to the busy schedules of working professionals and make lifelong learning more accessible are especially important for countries like Singapore which primarily rely on human resources to remain competitive in a changing world order and volatile economic climate.

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evolving at a much faster pace and in more complex, unpredictable and disruptive ways, adding to the demands that modern living places on us. In uncertain times, lifelong learning is an essential habit to meet the ever-changing demands placed on societies and economies.

Graduate studies that contribute to a university qualification, such as a masters degree, are increasingly becoming the avenue for adults to advance their knowledge for professional development. However, conventional graduate studies are a lengthy endeavour – and time is a luxury that working professionals can often ill afford.

To provide students with a solid foundation in the field, traditional graduate programmes often focus on theory rather than the practical applications that are important for problem-solving. As a result, a dichotomy arises between graduate education and the requirements of lifelong learning to meet the needs of society.

With the rise of new challenges, graduate programmes need to keep pace; they need to prepare working professionals to master not only the professional knowledge within their discipline and industry but also the research skills that will help them to think and apply innovative ideas and solutions to practical problems.

Considering these challenges, we need to re-think graduate education and lifelong learning to encourage professionals to embrace learning for personal and professional development.

A flexible path to lifelong learning

Innovations and new technologies have emerged at an unprecedented rate in the last decade. With the emergence of novel technologies, new jobs will be created and old ones will be lost.

Navigating these opportunities and challenges, a person is expected to switch careers between three to seven times in their working life.

Flexibility in when and how working professionals learn new skills that are relevant to their work and careers is key to facilitating lifelong learning. Bite-sized continuing education courses that cater to the busy schedules of working professionals are an alternative to conventional graduate studies.

Such programmes that make lifelong learning more accessible are especially important for countries like Singapore which primarily rely on human resources to remain competitive in a volatile economic climate.

To address the pain points of lifelong learning, the Singapore government has established SkillsFuture, a national initiative and platform that provides opportunities for learning new skills through short continuing education courses.

From 3D animation to healthcare analytics, the focus of the training courses on the platform is to enhance an adult learner's work performance and career prospects through mastery of the subject content, acquisition of critical inquiry competencies and the inculcation of a curious mind needed to drive innovation. These take place through active engagement in rich and diverse research learning experiences provided by experts in their respective professional fields.

Such courses may also encourage learners to pursue a full masters degree in the future.

Microcredential courses

As higher education providers, universities play a key role in encouraging working professionals to acquire new skills and understanding. To help professionals balance work and studies, the Centre for Professional and Continuing Education at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has collaborated with NTU schools and the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore's national teacher education institute, to create a wide range of microcredential courses called FlexiMasters.

As the name implies, adult learners in FlexiMasters can plan their learning pathway according to their own needs and schedules. This continuing education initiative enables working professionals to learn new skills in diverse and emerging areas through modular courses that can be stacked towards a microcredential. Where appropriate, these credits can be transferred to a full masters degree.

Real-world issues often intersect with many areas and interdisciplinary education stimulates creative problem-solving and critical thinking in response. Graduate education that exposes learners to diverse areas is crucial for preparing working professionals to deal with the challenges of the future.

Recognising the importance of applying theoretical knowledge to real-world problems, the masters programmes at NIE have been developed to link theory with professional practice.

These programmes are designed to enhance students' knowledge and competencies in their respective disciplines and industries. Programmes like the Master of Arts (Educational Management), Master of Arts in Professional Education (Training & Development) and Master of Science (Science of Learning) help students meet the new and changing demands in their careers and stay relevant in a challenging and global market.

Support for educators

Being the sole teacher education institute in Singapore, NIE is well positioned to provide the necessary support to educators who want to acquire new knowledge and skills, whether they are in the public or private sector, and whether they are teaching pre-schoolers or at a tertiary level.

NIE currently offers 29 masters programmes and specialisations covering a comprehensive range of disciplines and specialisations within education. For teachers keen on broadening and deepening their pedagogical knowledge, NIE offers the Master of Education programme comprising 16 specialisations.

Through partnerships with other schools in the university and experiential components focused on applying learning in authentic workplace contexts, the NIE's masters programmes offer a unique experience for professionals to develop deep skillsets. For example, the partnership between NIE and NTU's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine provides theoretical insights from the education and

neuroscience fields to foster critical scientific discussions in the Master of Science (Science of Learning) programme.

The rapidly-evolving world has caused the blurring of lines between graduate education and continuing education. Continuing education is no longer for the select few engaged in an academic paper chase, but for the many who wish to seek and acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to survive and thrive in the new world order.

The phrase 'learn, unlearn and relearn' coined by the American businessman and futurist Alvin Tofler has become an essential dictum. By making learning accessible and relevant for everyone at all stages of life, the new initiatives relating to graduate and continual education are poised to transform mindsets when it comes to lifelong learning.

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