**Public Lecture**

**SMU President Prof Lily Kong**

**Host: National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taiwan, 12 March 2026**

**iGER (Initiating General Education Renaissance) Programme**

# Whole Person Education and University Transformation:

# Re-thinking General Education for a 100-Year Life

## Introduction

Good morning. It is an honour to be here at National Chengchi University. I am grateful to President Li Tsai-Yen and Prof S.H. Lee for this invitation to share my thoughts, and the opportunity to learn from all of you.

I have looked forward to being here with you — leaders and scholars entrusted with shaping the future of general education in Taiwan's universities. You are not merely reviewing course requirements or refining distribution categories. You are engaging in a far deeper exercise: defining what it means to educate a human being in the twenty-first century. The work of general education committees is what I would call civilisational work. It concerns not only employability, but identity; not only skills, but character; not only knowledge, but judgement.

Allow me to begin with a question that is ancient, yet newly urgent: What is higher education for? Is it to prepare students for employment, or is it to prepare them for lives of meaning, responsibility, and contribution? For centuries, universities have navigated this tension between utility and formation.

Today, however, two powerful forces have intensified it beyond anything we have previously experienced: artificial intelligence and longevity. Together, they compel us to rethink not only what we teach, but who we are educating students to become — and for how long.

My argument this morning is straightforward. If we take seriously the reality of a 100-year life unfolding in an age of AI, then whole person education is no longer aspirational rhetoric. It is urgent necessity. And general education, properly conceived and courageously implemented, is one powerful instrument we possess to help realise it. I hasten to add, however, that it should be paired with a range of other instruments. It is not a silver bullet. I will return to this later when I propose four areas of needed disruption in higher education.

**A Global Moment of Reckoning: Three Points of Context**

*From Artificial Intelligence to Human Capabilities*

First, let me paint in the context within which we are having these discussions. We cannot speak about the future of universities without acknowledging artificial intelligence. Across global forums, AI is described as transformative, disruptive, and in some cases destabilising. Skills once considered highly valuable may become obsolete within years – sometimes short years. Entire job categories may be reconfigured or absorbed by automation. It is understandable that universities have responded by expanding programmes in data science, engineering, and digital technologies.

Yet there is a striking paradox. When senior leaders of major technology firms are asked what students should study today, many do not simply recommend coding or machine learning. Instead, they mention philosophy, ethics, history, and the liberal arts. This response reflects a deeper truth: in a world where machines can process information more quickly and accurately than humans, the most durable human capabilities are not computational. They are judgement, ethical reasoning, interpretive skill, creativity, and the ability to navigate ambiguity.

Artificial intelligence forces us to confront a paradox of value. The more powerful technology becomes, the more essential human discernment becomes. If this is so, then general education, where students wrestle with foundational questions, encounter diverse traditions of thought, and learn to reason across domains, becomes indispensable rather than optional.

It cannot be treated as a decorative supplement to disciplinary study. It is preparation for uncertainty, complexity, and moral responsibility.

*From Massification to Transformation*

A second piece of context is the need to shift from massification of higher education, which focuses on quantity, to the quality of higher education and the transformations it bears responsibility for. Taiwan and many societies in East Asia have achieved extraordinary success in expanding access to higher education. The transition from elite systems to universal participation is a remarkable accomplishment. In Taiwan, university enrolment reached 95 percent of high school graduates by 2008. Yet, youth unemployment among 20-to-24-year-olds remains nearly four times the national rate. In China, the term "ant tribe" emerged to describe struggling graduates flocking to megacities, accepting low-paying temporary positions despite their credentials. Some young people have embraced "lying flat" — rejecting intense work culture altogether. The phenomenon of "quiet quitting" has spread globally.

Massification of higher education therefore solved yesterday's problem. Today's challenge is transformation. When nearly everyone has a degree, the degree itself can no longer guarantee security or meaning. Youth unemployment, underemployment, and a growing scepticism toward traditional career trajectories signal that the old promise of linear success, where you study hard, secure stable employment, then retire comfortably, no longer holds in its former simplicity. The issue before us is not access alone. It is formation. It is the shaping of adaptable, resilient, reflective individuals capable of navigating discontinuity.

*The 100-Year Life and the Collapse of the Three-Stage Model*

A third piece of context. Life expectancy has risen dramatically over the past century. In many advanced societies, living into one's 90s is no longer exceptional, and reaching 100 is increasingly plausible. Yet our educational model remains anchored in a three-stage conception of life: first education, then work, and finally retirement. In this model, age is stage. Education is front-loaded, work occupies the middle decades, and learning is assumed to taper off.

In the context of a 100-year life, this linear model becomes untenable. Knowledge acquired at 22 cannot sustain a 60-year working life without substantial renewal. Identity formed in late adolescence cannot remain static across decades of technological disruption and social change. Financial capital alone cannot secure well-being across extended longevity. A long life requires multiple reinventions, continuous learning, emotional resilience, social networks, physical health, and ethical grounding. These are not peripheral competencies; they are existential requirements.

If universities are to prepare students for such lives, whole person education must become central rather than peripheral. And general education, when structured intentionally as an integrative core rather than a checklist of requirements, is uniquely positioned to cultivate many of these capabilities. It exposes students to diverse ways of knowing, invites reflection on meaning and values, and builds habits of critical inquiry that endure beyond disciplinary training.

**The Gap Between Need and Current Practice**

Despite these realities, many universities continue to operate with structures designed for a more stable era. Early and rigid specialisation channels students into narrow pathways before they have had adequate opportunity to explore their interests and identities. Hyper-specialisation within disciplines fragments knowledge and makes it difficult to address systemic problems that cut across domains. Enrolment in the humanities has declined, often justified by arguments about the need for immediate vocational relevance. Pedagogical approaches remain largely didactic, even in a world where information is readily accessible online. Assessment systems struggle with issues of grade inflation and questions about rigour.

These patterns are understandable; they reflect historical development and institutional incentives. Yet they are increasingly misaligned with contemporary demands. We are educating for stability in an age of volatility. We are training specialists for problems that require cross-domain knowledge and the ability to join the dots. We are delivering content in a world where content is ubiquitous.

Whole person education requires more than incremental reform. It requires reorientation, a shift in how we conceive the purpose and structure of learning. Such reorientation can take various directions.  I posit four, and highlight the role of general education in them, alongside other instruments of change.

**Four Areas of Disruption and the Role of General Education**

The areas of disruption and reinvention centre on four themes: the importance of going beyond the cognitive; the criticality of accentuating our humanity and managing human vulnerability; the cultivation of interdisciplinary depth; and the commitment to a lifelong journey with students. Let me take them in turn.

*Beyond the Cognitive*

The first area of disruption concerns the development of human capability beyond the purely cognitive. Universities have long privileged analytical reasoning and technical mastery. These remain indispensable. However, human beings possess capacities that extend beyond cognitive intelligence: self-awareness, empathy, ethical imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, and moral courage.

Howard Gardner, professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, had famously published his theory about multiple intelligences in 1983 in his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. He posited that people have different kinds of intelligences, namely: verbal-linguistic; logical-mathematical; spatial-visual; bodily-kinaesthetic. musical; interpersonal; intrapersonal; naturalist; and existential. His theory has been criticised for lack of empirical evidence, and that his "intelligences" are but different talents, personality traits, and abilities. Nonetheless, many educators have embraced his theory and sought to integrate it in their practice.

I have found his theory of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences persuasive. These intelligences are never given the same attention as cognitive intelligences, if at all. The former is defined as self-awareness and being in tune with one's inner feelings, values and beliefs, and the latter as the ability to detect and respond appropriately to the moods, motivations and desires of others. Personal growth, well-being and inner resilience – what makes up intrapersonal intelligence – play second fiddle in many university models that prioritise academic and professional skills. Emotional intelligence, interpersonal effectiveness and intercultural understanding have been given more lip service in recent times, but are seldom embedded systematically as learning outcomes. Attendant systems linked with appropriate pedagogy and formative assessment are absent – unlike those developed for cognitive intelligence.

Yet, whole person education requires that these capacities or intelligences be cultivated intentionally rather than left to extra-curricular chance. Let me dive into three qualities of intrapersonal intelligence: resilience, self-awareness and exploratory spirit.

Resilience is foundational in a 100-year life marked by transitions. Resilience is not merely access to counselling services after crises occur. It is the proactive cultivation of emotional regulation, social connectedness, sense of purpose, and the capacity to recover from failure.

General education can play a role here. It can embed resilience-building by incorporating structured reflection, ethical dilemma discussions, collaborative projects, and exposure to diverse viewpoints. When students engage seriously with philosophical disagreements, historical tragedies, or social and political conflicts, they learn to tolerate ambiguity and to respond thoughtfully rather than reactively. This intellectual and emotional resilience becomes a lifelong resource.

But general education is certainly not the only answer to building resilience. To do so proactively also entails promoting opportunities for social connections, creating environments where friendships are forged, and mentoring relationships developed; where community engagement and involvement, and wellness practices like mindfulness are systematically introduced. All are instrumental in nurturing social and emotional resilience, and in building support systems in personal and professional lives. These need to be intentional, and deserve planning and institutional enablers, much like the attention that curriculum has been given.

At my university, we have developed a resilience framework to help scaffold students' development of resilience. It seeks to develop the physical, intellectual, financial, career, social and emotional resilience of our students by providing them with the education, encouragement and experiences that can be used to navigate life's challenges. Education imparts knowledge and skills, and shapes attitudes. Encouragement provides professional and peer support. Experiences broaden students' emotional and psychological horizons through authentic learning environments. Like building a muscle, resilience takes time and intentionality — but students can be empowered to weather, learn and grow from life's inevitable challenges.

Self-awareness is another equally critical dimension of intrapersonal intelligence. Long lives require individuals to construct their own pathways rather than simply follow predetermined scripts. Students must learn to ask who they are, what they value, and how different domains of knowledge inform their choices.

General education, when designed as an integrative experience, provides structured encounters with foundational questions about justice, identity, sustainability, and human flourishing. Capstone seminars that require synthesis across courses can help students connect disciplinary study to broader human concerns. Reflection assignments and portfolio systems can encourage integration rather than accumulation. In this way, general education becomes the arena where students learn not only to acquire knowledge but to integrate it into a coherent sense of self.

Beyond general education, universities can draw inspiration from Stanford Life Design Lab's courses, which can help to cultivate self-awareness. The famed Design Lab director Bill Burnett who co-authored *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life* promulgates self-awareness as the ultimate key to thriving in an uncertain future. At Stanford, this is done through a series of design courses (such as Designing Your Stanford, Designing Your Life, and Designing the Professional), design thinking is used to help students design a fulfilling college experience, or design their lives and vocations after Stanford.

Such an approach respects that students should construct their lives with independence of thought, anchored in what they value and believe in. This is in contrast to all the educational systems around the world, where the well-laid out pathways from K-to-12 and then tertiary education, follow rigid curriculum set out clearly for students to follow, and where choices, when they can be made, are made along set paths and within pre-defined boundary parameters.

My own university has embraced this thinking. Our recently-established College of Integrative Studies allows students to design their own major. They identify a passion, a cause, that they are interested in, for example, urban governance, or strategic philanthropy, or environmental diplomacy, and the journey of identifying their interest helps to sharpen their self-awareness. SMU will soon be introducing "Design your own work-study" and "Design your own start up" electives, all with the same underpinning spirit and philosophy.

A third aspect of intrapersonal intelligence is a spirit of exploration and experimentation. When individuals confront a world where they have to periodically start afresh, they will need to be comfortable with exploration and cultivate a willingness to try new ways of thinking and doing.

I use an analogy from *Alice in Wonderland*, where Lewis Carroll invented the word "galumphing", possibly a portmanteau of "galloping" and "triumphant". The concept connotes exaggerated and exultant sprints and bolts. Anthropologists use the term to refer to exuberant, unstructured play, acting (at times, clumsily) without a specific goal in mind. In the world of learning and work, it seems a playful, spontaneous and uneconomical approach to problem-solving. Yet, such spontaneity often leads to unexpected discoveries. In Lewis Carroll's world, Alice's adventures exemplify this playful exploration, where curiosity and improvisation open new possibilities. It is the spirit of galumphing that we can embrace more, a willingness to break from tight structures and embrace spontaneity and a spirit of exploration.

This attitude can be caught, not taught. It can be facilitated, such as through crucible experiences, and independent production. A crucible experience is a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or altered state of awareness and identity. Living in a new city, or immersing oneself in unfamiliar environments offer such opportunities for personal development and self-discovery. Universities should facilitate crucible experiences; they help individuals challenge their values, reflect on their identities, and develop a stronger sense of self. While it is easy to offer the opportunity for a student exchange semester, or an internship overseas, the activity itself is not learning. It is the self-reflexivity that turns activity into learning, then into valuable experience. This is the current gap in most universities.

Another approach to cultivating a spirit of exploration and experimentation is to provide opportunities for independent production. Especially in societies where structure and hierarchy are pronounced, it is important to create opportunities for young people to engage in self-direction and independent innovation, to take risks, prototype new ideas, and pursue self-driven projects. Ironically, we can structure for self-direction, such as creating the space for students to design their own major, which I have already introduced earlier.

Whether it is galumphing, crucible experiences or independent production, they require loosening up structures and embracing what seems to be some inefficiencies. These are uncomfortable in highly structured, productivity-conscious societies. To facilitate better when students seek to change course of study, to support students who choose to take leave of absence in the midst of their degrees to try different things, and to be comfortable when some graduate and “fail” to work in the industry immediately related to their course of study – all these require different measures of success. They require that universities not be judged by the time to graduation as a measure of efficiency and success. They require a mindset that the so-called “leakage” between course of study and first profession is not unequivocally negative, accepting that we cannot predict with high degrees of accuracy how many in which professions we need. Neither can we plan and enforce with absolute precision how many universities must train in which area. Some level of galumphing – at least on the margins – must be encouraged, and not just tolerated.

And where does general education feature in cultivating a spirit of exploration and experimentation? It provides a protected space for students to explore a range of disciplines before narrow specialisation closes options. If we compress or instrumentalise this space in the name of efficiency, we constrain the very adaptability that longevity demands.

*Accentuating humanity, managing human vulnerability*

The second area of disruption and reinvention that universities must consider concerns accentuating humanity in an age of AI, for this is the value that humans bring when AI can do so much. If machines can compute and analyse at scale, what must humans contribute? The answer lies in judgment, empathy, interpretation, moral reasoning, and cultural understanding.

Michael Polanyi (1966), a British-Hungarian philosopher, highlighted in his book *The Tacit Dimension* how much of human knowledge is tacit and difficult to articulate, perhaps even beyond explicit understanding. Thus, even while AI offers immense potential, there is something about human intuition and tacit understanding that is irreplaceable. Polanyi's paradox, as it has come to be known, is about how human beings can undertake many tasks which we understand intuitively how to perform but cannot verbalise their rules or procedures. Similarly, Moravec's Paradox suggests that while machines excel at intellectual tasks, they struggle with basic human abilities like physical perception and social interaction. Both paradoxes stress the importance of cultivating the distinctly human qualities in students.

All this calls for a human-centered education, with capacities cultivated through sustained engagement with the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Courses in literature, philosophy, and history introduce students to moral ambiguity and historical contingency. They invite students to examine motives, narratives, and unintended consequences.

In studying the humanities, we learn about humanity, or what it means to be human. Through literature and history, we see, for example, the martyrdom of self-sacrificing leaders as much as the viciousness of ambition. We gain insights into what it means to have a kindred spirit but also a cruel enemy. We witness the tenderness of human love, the pain of loss and the joy of reunion. In an age of hyper-technology, all the more reason why we need the humanities. Where robots can dispense medicines, and chatbots replace human conversations, the jobs that will withstand the AI revolution are precisely the ones that require an understanding of human nature and a reliance on human empathy. The decline of the humanities in various parts of the world is thus in direct opposition to what the world needs now.

A general education that embeds these disciplines and perspectives is critical. In discussions of climate policy, biotechnology, or artificial intelligence itself, general education can ensure students grapple not only with what can be done, but with what should be done. This is not nostalgic defence of tradition. It is preparation for ethical complexity.

But teaching about the human condition is not the same as being human. Gratton and Scott (2017:85) remind us that tangible assets are only one dimension of living a 100-year life. Having the financial resources is important, but so too are "intangible assets" – "supportive family, great friends, … and good physical and mental health". To build a productive long life, the combination of both are important. In fact, they are not independent. Intangible assets are important in themselves, but they also play "an important reciprocal role in the development of tangible assets", for a "network of supportive and knowledgeable friends … are crucial for optimizing transitions and broadening career choices", while poor health and unhappy families reduce productivity and creativity at work (Gratton and Scott, 2017:86). Further, they depreciate over time, even intangible assets. If we fail to invest, by keeping in touch with friends and keeping engaged in sports, friendships and health will eventually depreciate and even dissipate (Gratton and Scott, 2017:86).

Whole person education therefore involves the cultivation of intangible assets such as enduring relationships, networks of trust, physical well-being, and civic commitment. Universities often treat these as peripheral to the formal curriculum. Yet in a long life, these assets prove decisive. General education can incorporate collaborative learning and community engagement components that connect students to broader society. At the same time, institutional architecture matters. Residences, student organisations, sports facilities, and cultural societies are not luxuries; they are environments for cultivating interpersonal intelligence and civic responsibility. If we believe whole person education matters, our budgeting and planning must reflect that belief.

Anchored in these beliefs, I have led my university over the last ten years to introduce a core curriculum that is intentional in cultivating an understanding of the human condition, introducing humanities and social sciences, as well as science and technology into what had essentially been a business-oriented core curriculum. We now have a core curriculum that integrates co-curriculum. In 2018, we introduced a core curriculum built on three pillars, of “capabilities”, “cultures”, and “civilisations”, and turned internship and community service into credit-bearing programmes.

After eight years, we have reviewed our core curriculum, and will soon be rolling out a new and updated core curriculum. I offer these to stimulate discussions here in Taiwan about what you seek to do.

*Cultivating interdisciplinary depth*

The third area of disruption concerns interdisciplinary depth. Contemporary challenges — from climate change to ageing populations — do not respect disciplinary boundaries. Yet we continue to equate depth exclusively with discipline. Disciplines are historically constructed frameworks that have served us well, but they are not immutable. Interdisciplinary integration can generate depth of a different kind: thematic depth rooted in the sustained study of complex problems.

Science and technology tell us ‘what’ can be done – for example, what vaccines can be produced with known science and technology; what speed and distance can be covered by electric vehicles with what level of reduced carbon footprint when compared to petrol-run vehicles; and what depth of underground construction can be achieved with extant engineering prowess, creating what capacity for housing, offices, and other infrastructures, to cite a few examples. But science does not tell us why vaccines are embraced or rejected; why car owners are not rushing to convert to electric vehicles; and why technologies to build underground would not lead to housing shortages in land-scarce cities being addressed more rapidly.

The answers to these questions lie in psychological, social, cultural and economic factors. Human behaviour frequently resists change due to psychological factors and ingrained habits. The inconvenience of lengthy battery-charging, range anxiety, and the higher retail prices create barriers to EV adoption. Vaccine hesitancy stems from peer influence, amplified by the rapid spread of misinformation online. Cognitive biases further distort risk perceptions and amplify fears. The lack of direct sunlight, and the fear of living underground, including the cultural association with death and burial, limit the types of uses that the underground can be put to. Addressing these issues requires more than technological fixes; policy interventions need to be grounded in an understanding of human motivations, social mores, economic dynamics, and cultural symbolisms.

General education lays the foundation for such integration by exposing students to multiple epistemologies and training them in comparative reasoning. Upper-level integrative seminars can allow students to pursue thematic clusters, drawing rigorously from multiple disciplines. We must legitimise and protect such pathways. When financial pressures arise, interdisciplinary programmes are often questioned first. Yet if we are serious about addressing real-world complexity, they must be sustained. General education can serve as the bridge between disciplinary grounding and integrative application.

At SMU, our core curriculum and the College of Integrative Studies exemplify this belief and investment in interdisciplinary depth.

*From 18 to 80: Universities as lifelong enablers*

The fourth and final area of disruption concerns the temporal scope of education. If life spans 100 years, education cannot be confined to youth. The most obvious approach to supporting multi-stage lives is to introduce professional and continuing education programmes available throughout the life course of adults, best delivered as flexible learning options like modular courses, certifications, and professional development programmes. A more sophisticated approach leverages AI and data analytics to personalise content, thus offering tailored learning experiences that match individual career aspirations. While much of such professional and continuing education programmes will be skills-based, those capabilities that general education tends to cultivate, such as communication, ethical reasoning, integrative thinking and cultural literacy, offer precious assets too.

They are not relevant only at age 20, but remain essential across decades of professional and civic engagement. Universities must therefore view themselves as lifelong partners rather than phase providers. Modular offerings allow re-entry pathways for alumni, and successful programmes are built on age-integrative classrooms where learners at different life stages engage together. Such integration can enrich discussion and dismantle generational isolation.

In 2017, we had launched SMU Academy, leveraging SMU's strong academic foundation and close industry partnerships, SMU Academy delivers practical, skills-focused courses in areas such as digital transformation, data analytics, leadership, finance, and sustainability. Its programmes are tailored for working professionals seeking to upskill, reskill, and drive meaningful impact in their careers and organizations. These are offered mainly in Singapore, but I am happy to share that the Academy has also worked with companies in the region to offer training.

**Conclusion: Universities for the Century Ahead**

Let me conclude. Universities have endured for nearly a millennium because they have evolved in response to social transformation. How will contemporary universities evolve in response to an age defined by AI and longevity? I believe whole person education is key, and general education is an important part.  This is not sentimental idealism. It is structural realism.

General education has been part of Taiwan's university system for four decades — since the Ministry of Education's 1984 guidelines required all universities to offer courses across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. And the roots go deeper still. Tunghai University has championed whole-person education since its founding in 1955. The ideal of cultivating well-rounded individuals connects to ancient Chinese traditions — the six arts[1] of the Zhou dynasty, which sought to develop not just knowledge but character, not just skill but wisdom.

So when iGER speaks of a "renaissance" in general education, the word is well chosen. A renaissance is not the birth of something new, but the revival and renewal of something valuable that may have been neglected or diminished. And I suspect many of you recognise that challenge: general education exists in your institutions, but is it thriving? Is it central to your mission, or has it become something students rush to complete — boxes to check before getting to their "real" studies? Our job must be to help students, their parents and society at large understand the critical value of general education, and whole person education in universities and value them.

[1] During the Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 bc), students in ancient China were required to master the six arts: rites (li 禮), music (yue 樂), archery (she 射), horsemanship (yu 御), calligraphy (shu 書) and mathematics (shu 數)

This renaissance matters — not as an abstract ideal, but as an urgent practical necessity. Perhaps the pressures many universities face today — demographic decline, youth unemployment, questions about the value of degrees — are not obstacles to general education's revival, but reasons for it.

If we prepare students merely for their first job, we have failed them. If we prepare them to live well, think critically, act ethically, build relationships, and reinvent themselves across a century of change, we honour the deepest purpose of the university.

The future will belong to institutions that can pivot without losing their soul. May our universities not only endure, but flourish as places where human beings are formed for long lives of meaning, responsibility, and contribution.

Thank you.

[4,683 words | 50 minutes]