President's Forum on Disruptive Innovation in Higher Education

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Framing Keynote by SMU President Prof Lily Kong

Title: *Who Needs a University When You Have AI?*

Good afternoon, colleagues and friends. It is a pleasure to join you here at VinUniversity.

Let me begin with a question that is deliberately unsettling, and perhaps a little uncomfortable for those of us who lead universities: *Who needs a university when you have AI?* This may suggest a pessimistic stance, the way it is framed.

However, I believe this room is not asking whether AI can do what universities do, nor are those of us gathered here such believers in the power of AI that we are ready to deem universities irrelevant. Rather, the appropriate question is about what this moment reveals of our assumptions and purpose. That is the deeper work. What AI is exposing is our habits of "schoolishness"– an obsession with achieving good grades, credentials and compliance at the expense of curiosity. In that sense, AI is not a replacement for universities, but a mirror forcing us to confront what education is for and how we are delivering it.

The organisers have requested us to speak about specific domains. I will focus on curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. These form the defining architecture of the university experience — shaping what and how we teach, and ultimately, what kind of graduate we will have.

What AI Changes; What It Reveals

Across the world, we are already feeling the strain from AI prevalence. This is true at institutional and individual levels.

Institutions face rising compute costs, vendor dependency, and cybersecurity vulnerabilities, not to mention challenges in dealing with integrity issues. A recent UNESCO survey revealed that only 19% of universities have formal AI policies, and progress is concentrated in Europe and North America where close to 70% report efforts in various stages, whereas in the rest of the world, readiness is much more limited. Institutions are just not ready to shape the use of AI in education and research.

For individual educators, the same UNESCO survey found that, while 9 in 10 educators use AI tools, over half feel uncertain about applying them effectively in teaching or research.

Similarly, even in the most advanced economies, more students arrive at university having used AI, than having learned anything about AI – not its biases and its hallucinations, for example. This reflects a deeper gap in digital literacy and the urgent need to cultivate the ability to evaluate information.

What We Must Protect, Cultivate and Build

So, what must universities do in their educational endeavours? Whether it is in curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment – let me use the scaffold of "Protect-Cultivate-Build" to frame my discussion.

Area	Protect	Cultivate	Build
Curriculum	Intellectual rigour	Interdisciplinarity, AI literacy	AI-enabled resources
Pedagogy	Dialogue, human relationship	Challenge-based learning	New learning ecosystems and spaces
Assessment	Integrity, fairness, standards	Reasoning, judgment	Understanding, outcomes

1. Curriculum Architecture

First, a university curriculum must **protect intellectual rigour**. It must offer intellectual stretch by pushing students to encounter complex ideas with depth and rigour, not rely on soundbites that pander to the TikTok 3-second mode of communication. This requires students to read seriously and deeply – to wrestle with original texts, not summaries, including AI summaries. Thus, we must protect the time-honoured practice of assigning significant reading material, including original material to hone our students' ability to handle complexity and profundity.

At the same time, exposure to original classics, such as *Das Kapital* and *The*

Analects is not nostalgia. They shape not just a learned individual but one with moral and civic purpose.

Second, a university curriculum must also anticipate and cultivate new competencies. Let me highlight two. One key curricular responsibility is to **cultivate integrative thinking** across disciplines. In other words, the curriculum must intentionally embed courses where interdisciplinarity and integrative thinking are at play. Too often, we loosely believe that if a student studies two or more disciplines in their curriculum, interdisciplinary integration magically takes place. I am of the view that we need to design for it in our curriculum, and faculty need to model the way. Not all courses need to be of this ilk, but a curriculum should not be absent of it.

The curriculum also needs to **cultivate AI literacy**. There are two ways of deciphering “AI literacy”. First, as Northeastern University President Joseph Aoun put it: for centuries, universities have taught students to understand the physical, biological, and human worlds. AI creates a fourth world — inorganic, agentic, and interwoven with all the others. Students need to understand what this new reality is and how it works, so as to anticipate its biases and catch its hallucinations; this is a curriculum responsibility.

Second, today's graduates need AI literacy not as standalone modules, but woven throughout their learning — the ability to prompt critically, evaluate algorithmic outputs, and recognise when human judgment must override machine recommendation. They need ethical reasoning about AI's biases, and interdisciplinary fluency to work across the technical-humanistic divide that AI constantly challenges. Such curriculum needs to be paired with appropriate pedagogy and assessment, which I will return to.

So, I've highlighted how we must protect intellectual rigour and cultivate interdisciplinarity and AI literacy through curriculum. Finally, we must also **build AI-enabled resources** to support curriculum. For example, universities can build the AI capability to create personalized educational materials based on data-driven insights into student learning styles and capabilities.

2. Transformative pedagogy

If curriculum asks what we teach, pedagogy asks how we teach — and here the transformation opportunity is profound. Using the Protect-Cultivate-Build framework again, I begin by emphasizing how we must **protect** what is irreducibly human: dialogue, inquiry, mentorship, and the relationship between teacher and student. These remain at the heart of learning. From our own experience, we will recall how we tend to do better in a school subject when we have a good teacher, or even when we like a teacher.

Next, we must cultivate new pedagogical capabilities. Our faculty must adapt in an age engineered for distraction and one that tempts short-cuts among students. Universities will need to develop structured approaches to faculty capability-building. Ithaca College, for example, has introduced a four-tier AI digital literacy pathway for faculty: from introductory workshops and faculty-led webinars, to mini-grants for experimentation, a multi-day AI Institute, and finally, US$10,000 stipends for those redesigning courses for AI-enabled learning environments. This signals a shift from individual interest to institutionalised support.

Likewise, Generative AI becomes embedded in student habits — 92% of UK undergraduates now reporting its use in coursework (source: HEPI) — universities must create pedagogical models that acknowledge and integrate these tools. It is unwise to simply ban them. In this regard, challenge-based approaches offer opportunities for pedagogical innovation.

SMU-X, the flagship experiential learning model at Singapore Management University, pairs students with real clients – from government, industry and non-profit sectors to tackle live, complex problems. These defy easy use of AI for solutions, but even so, increasingly, these projects could integrate the use of AI for surfacing blind spots, refining solutions and cutting costs. AI becomes a collaborator, and in time, it is possible to imagine students learning to collaborate with one another, as well as to manage a parallel team of AI agents.

Work-integrated learning or work-study programmes offer another opportunity at pedagogical transformation. At SMU, we have both work-study electives and work-study degrees, where students intern for some days a week and take classes in related areas on other days, so that learning derives from both the world of practice and academia.

To cultivate new pedagogical capabilities, we must **build new learning ecosystems and spaces.** At SMU, building the live projects in SMU-X where AI sits alongside human expertise requires a suite of partnerships and management, and different types of learning spaces – those that facilitate discussion and group work, assisted by technology, rather than the traditional lecture hall. To free up the time of faculty to enable deeper engagement with students, institutions can look to deploy agentic AI to coordinate student services and streamline teaching operations, all of which require building new ecosystems and spaces.

3. Assessment Frameworks — From Checking to Trust-Building

Let me turn now from curriculum and pedagogy to assessment. We must continue to protect rigour, fairness, and integrity. But to do so effectively, assessment must cultivate what AI cannot do, at least, not currently: reasoning, judgment, ethical discernment, collaboration, and the ability to explain one's process. These are the skills that make knowledge actionable and human.

When essays, lab reports, and research summaries can now be produced on command, the issue is no longer only about academic integrity. It is whether our assessments genuinely measure learning — and whether a degree reflects capability or merely endurance.

Here, the initial global response to AI offers a cautionary tale. Reviving blue-book exams, banning technology and doubling down on compliance moves us backwards. One university president has remarked that he would rather “jettison detection tools entirely in a genuine signal to restore trust” than to continue an arms race he cannot win. The real crisis is: What exactly do we believe a university education should cultivate? This is why institutions should rethink assessment frameworks — shifting from checking to demonstration, from output to reasoning and judgment. In this regard, assessment needs to go beyond testing for knowledge to other cognitive skills like reasoning, and even human skills like collaboration and judgment.

Universities worldwide are starting to move in this direction. Oral defences, live builds (hands-on, real-world projects), competency-led portfolios, and AI-supported simulations are increasingly used to evaluate capability in contexts where generative tools are present.

To structure our thinking around assessment, I point to the example of RMIT Vietnam, which has developed assessment frameworks with three clear categories: AI-allowed (where students document their process), AI-assisted (where AI supports but doesn't generate final work), and AI-prohibited (oral defenses, timed exams) — providing transparency and reducing ambiguity. Ultimately, we must build frameworks that assume AI is “in the room.” The aim is not to out-police technology, but to design tasks in which students must show how they used AI — discerningly, ethically, and in service of deeper understanding.

In sum, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as the very architecture of university experience confront myriad challenges as AI takes the world by storm. But they present opportunities for universities to fundamentally rethink why we exist and what we can best do. Across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, a pattern emerges: AI compels us to protect what is foundational, cultivate new capabilities while strengthening what already matters, and build what does not yet exist. It is in this spirit that we consider the opportunities ahead, recognising that the challenges – and opportunities – play out similarly, yet differently, across regions and contexts.

Each university will find its own path. At SMU, we express this through a scaffolded four-year model: foundational critical thinking in Year 1; structured human–AI collaboration in Year 2; messy, open-ended problems in Year 3; and interdisciplinary, industry-linked capstones in Year 4. The goal is not AI proficiency alone, but the ability to integrate it discerningly in increasingly complex contexts.

Regional Anchoring

Opportunities also present to have AI systems that preserve vernacular languages and cultural contexts. SEA-LION, for example, is a “family of efficient, open-source, multilingual, multimodal language models designed to understand Southeast Asia’s diverse languages, cultures, and contexts”. It is designed to “capture the intricate linguistic and cultural nuance of under-represented population groups and low resource languages across Southeast Asian communities”. Using such tools would be more contextually appropriate than those developed elsewhere. As important would be the design of curricula that reflects ASEAN’s context and priorities; and the crafting of assessments that honour regional ways of knowing.

Closing – An Honest Answer

Let me return to the provocation: *Who needs a university when you have AI?*

The honest response is not to insist on our indispensability. If universities define themselves by content delivery or credentialing alone, then indeed fewer may need us. AI already excels in these functions.

But universities have never been mere repositories of information. Robert Hutchins (the fifth president of the University of Chicago) had wisely said that universities exist for 'the cultivation of the intellectual virtues' — the formation of minds capable of seeking truth, weighing evidence, and acting with integrity.

AI accelerates answers; it cannot help us ask better questions, hold complexity, or imagine futures grounded in justice and human dignity.

As we move into the panels this afternoon and then into the Leadership Sprint, we have been invited to name the disruptions candidly — but also the opportunities with equal clarity. If we can do that, we will not only prepare our universities for the AI era; we will shape an educational future worthy of the region we hope to build.

Thank you.