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Embracing Futuristic Technology For Asia's Growth

Panel speakers at the Leaders in Science forum discussed the importance of embracing technologies of the future.

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AsianScientist (Aug. 3, 2016) - Research, innovation, creativity and enterprise—these four drivers were highlighted as cornerstones for Asia's continued economic and social progress into the future by a panel of speakers at the Leaders in Science Forum yesterday.

The panel discussion, which took place at the Fusionopolis research hub in Singapore, was moderated by Dr. Raj Thampuran, managing director of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR). Also speaking were Mr. William Saito, special advisor of the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan; Professor Lui Pao Chuen, advisor of the National Research Foundation; Professor Tan Eng Chye, deputy president and provost of the National University of Singapore; Professor Freddy Boey, deputy president and provost of Nanyang Technological University (NTU); and Professor David Chan, director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University.

The forum kicked-off the one-north Festival, a five-day science and technology event open to the general public. From August 2-6, 2016, there will be a series of free workshops, masterclasses and exhibitions by scientists, engineers and private companies to highlight the research taking place at A*STAR and across Singapore.

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Embracing interconnectedness

When asked about how public policy should best adapt to the technological challenges of the 21st century, Professor Lui Pao Chuen said that policymakers will need to start looking at issues and opportunities as interconnected systems instead of self-contained ones.

According to Lui, this increasingly interconnected world also demands that policymakers think 'horizontally,' rather than 'vertically'—Facebook and Uber are just two wildly successful examples of companies that built innovative new systems from technologies already present, he said.

Policymakers can learn from these companies and bring apparently unrelated functions together, instead of seeing them as the purview of different ministries, he said.

"The biggest gap right now is between economics, and science and technology. Both sides need to understand what's going on with the other side, and this divide needs to be closed," Lui noted.

The future of education

Professor Boey shared his vision of education in the future, and how universities can no longer "go on looking in the rear view mirror."

"I think the greatest challenge to universities is the technology itself. Instead of worrying about it we should embrace it," Boey said.

"Never before in human history has it been so opportune for us to re-look learning because the same person, with the same brain, and with the same limited time, can learn two times better with new technology."

The incorporation of technology into NTU's curriculum has been promising so far, according to Boey—the university's medical students already substitute traditional, stilted lectures with videos that they view before attending interactive seminars.

Boey also pondered about how technology may one day help to do away with exams, via innovative solutions that track and grade the students' progress as they learn.

Technology: will it unite or divide?

When asked about how technology might cause a divide between the tech-savvy innovators of the future and the less-educated, Mr. William Saito flipped the premise around and said that technology was in fact a social leveler. He honed in on the idea that in this day and age anyone could be an innovator, especially if one possessed an education in computer science.

"A computer science education is very transformational. Anyone with an idea can be entrepreneurial, and create something without much investment or capital unlike in prior generations," Saito said.

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Nevertheless, Saito recognized the difficulties in getting everyone off to an equal start, citing the disparity of technology infrastructure and access across the world—40 percent of the world's population remains cut off from the internet, for example.

Saito said that he was hopeful that the intense technological change would help bring low-cost but powerful devices to areas that need them the most, adding that providing access to technology to every individual is the moral responsibility of governments around the world.

Asian Scientist Magazine is a media partner of the one-north Festival.

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