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Engaging Students and Communities

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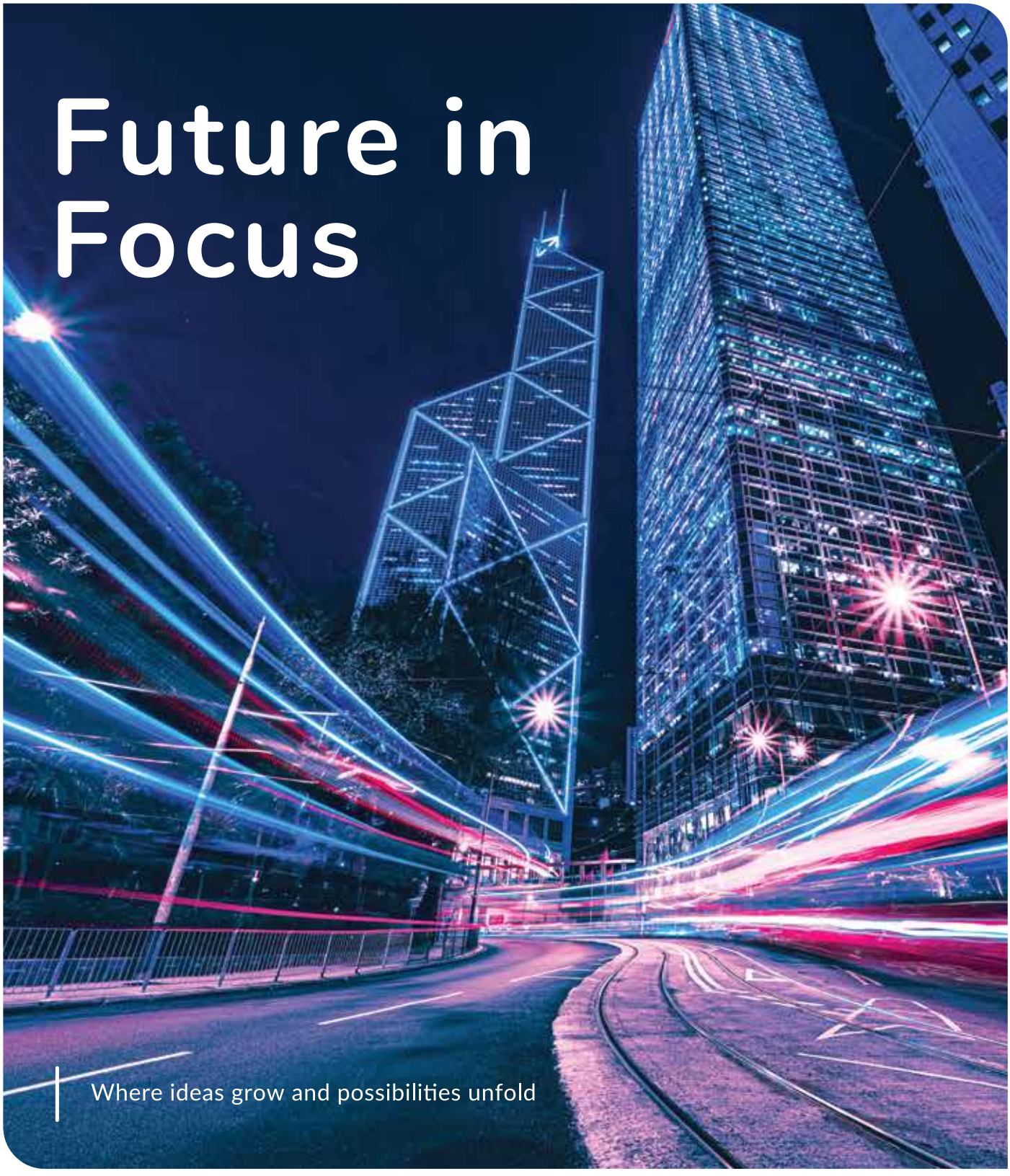

Future in Focus

Where ideas grow and possibilities unfold

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In today's dynamic workforce, open and distance learning (ODL) is no longer just about widening access – it's about creating measurable impact in talent development, workforce transformation, and nation building. This drives everything we do – from flexible pathways for working adults, to targeted industry upskilling, and specialised training for educators, special groups, and communities.

With this vision, I had the privilege of sharing Wawasan Open University's (WOU) transformative journey at the International Conference on Open and Innovative Education in Hong Kong, highlighting our shift from a traditional ODL model to a future-ready, skills-focused ecosystem that is agile and industry-responsive.

Globally, WOU was also represented by Assoc Prof Dr Dewi Amat Sapuan, Director of the Centre for ODL Learning Experiences (COLE), who spoke at D2L Connection Singapore on learner experience, digital accessibility, and workforce transformation. Meanwhile, Assoc Prof Ts Dr Andrew Tan Kian Lam, Dean of the School of Digital Technology (DiGiT), presented groundbreaking research on using Augmented Reality (AR) to spark interest in cultural and historical heritage at the Second International Symposium on the Transition from Digital Technologies to the Digital Society.

In the land of happiness – Bhutan – the George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies (GIOAS) engaged thought leaders and development experts, most recently exploring the framework of Gross National Happiness at an international conference co-organised with Bhutan's Tarayana Foundation.

Our School of Technology and Engineering Science (STE) completed a four-part STEM Facilitator workshop series, training 120 teachers from 70 schools in bridge building, 3D printing, AR Micro:bit, and Android app development – nurturing early STEM interest and strengthening Malaysia's tech talent pipeline. Another STE initiative, WOUTech'25, once again provided a platform for final-year technology students to showcase their innovations to industry experts and peers.

The School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (SEHS) also ran a hands-on workshop in essential first aid and life-saving skills for preschool educators and childcare practitioners.

Reaffirming our commitment to quality, relevant business education, Assoc Prof Dr Gary Tan, Executive Dean of the School of Business and Administration (SBA), shares why business degrees remain important and how they are evolving for today's learners.

Our newest industry partnership with Sophic Automation further bridges classroom learning with workplace demands. Through our work-based learning model, students gain structured, real-world industry experience while applying their skills directly in actual workplace settings.

From global conferences to grassroots training, these engagements reflect WOU's holistic approach to shaping talents who are not only skilled, but also socially conscious and future-ready.

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TRANSFORMING OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING FOR IMPACT IN A DIGITALLY DISRUPTED WORLD

▲Prof Dr Lily Chan

In a rapidly evolving digital age, open and distance learning (ODL) must be redefined – not merely as a channel of widening access to education and workforce training, but as a transformative force that delivers real, measurable impact.

Speaking at the 2025 International Conference on Open and Innovative Education (ICOIE) on 9 July at Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Prof Dr Lily Chan, Chief Executive and Vice Chancellor of WOU, delivered a keynote titled 'From Access to Impact: Rethinking Digital Transformation in Open Education'. Her address offered a bold vision for how ODL must evolve in an age shaped by workforce disruption, AI acceleration, and the growing demand for lifelong, skills-based learning.

"Digital transformation in open education must go beyond the adoption of tools – it demands a fundamental rethinking of what we deliver, how we deliver it, and who truly benefits from learning," Prof Chan asserted.

Drawing on global trends and WOU's own transformation, Prof Chan described the shift from a conventional ODL model – centred on flexible, open entry, self-paced static content, and degree-focused delivery – to a future-ready ecosystem that is learner-driven, mobile-first, and defined by job-ready skills and stackable, lifelong learning pathways.

Today's learners, she emphasised, expect more than flexibility. They seek relevance, modularity, clear career outcomes, and support for continuous upskilling.

"ODL has made tertiary education more accessible than ever, especially for adult learners and remote communities. But in a digital-first economy, access alone is no longer enough. The real opportunity lies in enabling learners to thrive – to gain skills, stay employable, and grow throughout life."

Citing projections that 65% of the global workforce will require reskilling by 2030, Prof Chan underscored ODL's growing role as a critical driver in workforce transformation.

"In Malaysia alone, 3.5 million workers are targeted for upskilling. WOU is responding with a growing suite of modular programmes and microcredentials tailored for working professionals. ODL is the most scalable and inclusive way to bridge the talent gap – not only in Malaysia, but across ASEAN."

She outlined five strategic enablers underpinning WOU's digital transformation: institutional purpose and culture, learner-centric design, stackable pathways, empowered staff, and alignment with national and industry priorities.

WOU's approach includes pioneering modular credentials that allow learners to progress at their own pace, aligned to evolving workforce needs.

"Employers today are placing greater value on what you can do, not just where you studied. That's why WOU champions stackable credentials and short, flexible programmes – aligned with industry needs and delivered through platforms like Coursera, edX, and Google – to help learners build real-world skills, one module at a time."

Supporting this shift is WOU's strong investment in digital capacity-building. Through its Centre for ODL Experiences (COLE), the University equips staff with continuous training in AI tools, digital pedagogy, and learner experience design – enabling educators not just to teach, but to innovate.

Prof Chan also highlighted WOU's strategic location within Penang's established innovation and manufacturing ecosystem – positioning the University as a strategic knowledge partner in co-developing programmes aligned with high-tech and innovation-driven industries.

Reaffirming WOU's mission to deliver affordable, flexible, and future-focused education, she emphasised: "The future of ODL lies not just in reaching more learners, but in empowering them to thrive."

WOU-SOPHIC PARTNERSHIP ACCELERATES WORK-BASED LEARNING FOR TALENT GROWTH

▲ A group photo marks the strategic partnership.

WOU has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Penang-based industrial automation solutions and engineering services provider, Sophic Automation (Sophic), to facilitate mutual cooperation in Work-Based Learning (WBL) education – a forward-thinking model that blends theoretical knowledge with structured, real-world industry experience.

The partnership highlights both parties' commitment to empowering and nurturing a highly skilled technological workforce equipped to meet evolving industry demands and bridge emerging skills gaps.

Under the agreement, qualified students enrolled in WOU's WBL programme – specifically the Bachelor of Technology (Honours) in Mechatronic Systems (BTMS) – will be recommended for meaningful employment at Sophic for the duration of their studies at WOU, subject to requirements set by both parties. Through this arrangement, students will undergo on-the-job training while applying classroom knowledge in real-world industrial settings.

This academia-industry synergy aims to equip WOU students with practical industry experience to enhance their technical competencies and job readiness, while enabling Sophic to build a long-term talent pipeline of highly skilled professionals.

Welcoming the partnership, Prof Ts Dr Yap Eng Hwa, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) said the initiative reflects WOU's continued efforts to engage with industry in developing a dynamic workforce that aligns with the evolving demands of technology-driven sectors such as smart manufacturing, robotics, and automation.

He elaborated, "This collaboration is part of our broader mission to champion academia-industry strategies that shape agile, tech-savvy talents ready to hit the ground running. By integrating structured workplace immersion into our degree pathways, we're actively bridging the gap between education and employment, and building a sustainable talent pool that continuously supports industry transformation."

"Our innovative approach allows students to earn course credits while working on real projects in the workplace, immersing themselves in professional environments and exploring meaningful career paths. This gives them a competitive edge by building skills that employers value, while also ensuring companies gain access to highly motivated talents trained with industry relevance in mind."

"At Sophic, we believe in growing talent from the ground up – and this partnership with WOU enables just that," said Koh Dim Kuan, CEO of Sophic Automation.

"By embedding work-based learning into students' degree experience, we're not only nurturing future-ready engineers, but also shaping individuals who understand the pace, precision, and problem-solving mindset required in real-world industrial environments. It's a win-win for the students, for us, and for the broader tech ecosystem."

The MoU was officially inked on 23 April 2025 at Sophic's premises by Prof Yap and Koh, with Assoc Prof Ts Dr Sean Tan Koon Tatt, Dean of WOU's School of Technology and Engineering Science (STE), and Janniece Loh, Chief Culture Officer at Sophic, witnessing the signing.

REDESIGNING LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE: WOU TAKES THE STAGE AT SOUTHEAST ASIA'S PREMIER EDTECH FORUM

In a world reshaped by digital disruption and shifting learner behaviours, higher education must do more than adapt – it must lead. This means rethinking how, what, and for whom we design learning.

At the recent D2L Connection Singapore event on 23 May 2025, WOU joined a dynamic regional conversation on the future of learning and work, where education leaders from across Southeast Asia shared bold ideas and practical strategies for learner-centric design, workforce readiness, and inclusive access.

▲ Dr Dewi shares her expertise during the panel discussion.

"Modern learners want something very flexible, instantaneous, and they want learning to be integrated seamlessly into their lifestyles. To support this, WOU has incorporated user experience (UX) research into its operations and introduced roles such as interaction experience designers to craft more intuitive and engaging learning journeys," said Assoc Prof Dr Dewi Amat Sapuan, Director of the Centre for ODL Learning Experiences (COLE).

BUILDING SKILLS THAT MATTER

Dr Dewi spotlighted WOU's strategic role in advancing Malaysia's high-tech talent pipeline – particularly in Penang's booming semiconductor and electronics sector – in step with evolving industry needs and the country's broader talent development agenda.

"We've partnered with three leading companies in Penang's semiconductor and electronics sector to offer industry-recognised certifications and stackable microcredentials tailored to their needs."

A UNIVERSITY THAT NEVER STOPS LEARNING

WOU's learning philosophy goes beyond its students. The university fosters a culture of continuous development across the board – from encouraging faculty research in emerging fields to helping operational staff upskill and apply new knowledge in their work.

For students, Dr Dewi explained, this commitment translates into flexible learning pathways and progressive credentialing.

"Our microcredentials let students build their qualifications step by step, making their learning journey more meaningful and aligned with both personal and career goals."

OPENING DOORS TO TECHNICAL TALENT

As Malaysia's leading open distance learning (ODL) institution, WOU remains firmly rooted in equity and access. Through its open admissions and APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) framework, WOU welcomes learners who might otherwise be left behind – such as technical assistants with years of hands-on experience but no formal qualifications.

Underscoring this commitment, Dr Dewi highlighted the School of Technology and Engineering Science (STE) , which offers ODL programmes in mechatronics, electronics, and construction management – fields rarely accessible through flexible learning.

"We want to make flexible learning real – not just in business or IT, but in technical areas that have long been considered off-limits for distance learners."

REPRESENTING MALAYSIA ON THE REGIONAL STAGE

Dr Dewi was joined on the panel by Wong Poh Seng, Director of the Centre for Teaching & Learning Development at Nanyang Polytechnic, Singapore, and Benhur Ong, Chancellor of De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde, Philippines. The session was moderated by Dr Cristi Ford, Chief Learning Officer at D2L.

Also attending from WOU were Prof Dr Lily Chan, Chief Executive and Vice Chancellor; Ts Dhanaletchmi N Narayanasamy, lecturer at STE; and Leong Yin Ling, User Interface Designer.

▲ Prof Chan, Dr Dewi, Leong Yin Ling, and Ts Dhanaletchmi at the D2L Connection Singapore.

Organised by global learning innovation company D2L, the event carried the theme 'Ignite the Joy of Learning' and brought together academics, technologists, and institutional leaders to explore how technology and learner-centred design are reshaping education across Southeast Asia.

▲ Attendees at D2L Connection Singapore striking the moose's horn sign, a nod to D2L's mascot, Morris the Moose.

SILICON VALLEY EXPERT SHARES GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON TALENT, INNOVATION, AND SEMICONDUCTOR FUTURE AT INDUSTRY DIALOGUE HOSTED BY WOU

▲ A group photo of Dr Kewei Yang (fifth from right) with Penang industry leaders, WOU senior management, and academics during the closed-door luncheon and industry dialogue.

WOU hosted a closed-door luncheon and dialogue on 15 July 2025 featuring Dr Kewei Yang, renowned Silicon Valley technologist and co-founder of Analogix Semiconductor. The event brought together Penang's industry leaders and academics to discuss how Malaysia can boost its competitiveness in innovation, talent development, and industry collaboration – especially in the fast-evolving semiconductor sector.

Chaired by Tan Sri Andrew Sheng, Chairman of the George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies (GIOAS) and WOU Board member, the session explored global strategies to tackle talent shortages, academic-industry disconnects, and infrastructure challenges. Dr Yang emphasised that "talent is the true bottleneck of innovation," urging Malaysia to invest boldly in cultivating adaptable, systems-level thinkers across all technical roles.

WOU Chief Executive & Vice Chancellor, Prof Dr Lily Chan reaffirmed the University's commitment to supporting the industry through flexible programmes and microcredentials that empower working adults to upskill in real time.

Attending the dialogue were leading industry figures including Dr Jeffrey Hwang, Group CEO of Qdos Holdings Berhad; Michel Van Crombrugge, Senior Director of Tecan and Honorary Consul of the Kingdom of Belgium in Penang; Dr Matin Ng, Deputy Group CEO of UWC Berhad; and Leonard Tan, Product Operations Director at Dell Technologies. Tan Leng Hock, CEO of Wawasan Education Foundation and Prof Ts Dr Yap Eng Hwa, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) of WOU were also present.

BURNED OUT? WOU WEBINAR OFFERS WAYS TO MANAGE STRESS AND STAY MOTIVATED

Feeling like you're constantly juggling work, studies, and family, yet still grappling with the nagging thought that it's never enough? You're certainly not alone. That all-too-relatable sentiment, perfectly encapsulated by the phrase "So much work lah!" during a recent WOU talk, captures the daily reality faced by many adult learners.

In a webinar organised by WOU's Centre for Foundation Studies Brian John Dorai, Senior Lecturer from the School of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences (SEHS), delivered an engaging talk titled 'Deal with Stress: Succeed in High Pressure Environments' to help participants recognise signs of burnout, take control of their mental health, and develop sustainable self-care strategies.

During the one-hour session, Brian outlined several visible signs of burnout, from a pervasive lack of motivation and various physical symptoms to difficulty concentrating and a noticeable drop in performance.

Next, Brian walked participants through the differences between stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Defining burnout as a "syndrome resulting from chronic stress that has not been successfully managed", he also identified several potential triggers causing them.

Finally, the discussion turned to practical self-care and effective coping mechanisms. Participants learned about strategies such as time-boxing, boundary setting, positive self-talk, reframing relationships, fostering social engagement, and prioritising personal time.

"You're not alone," Brian reassured participants, strongly encouraging them to reach out to family, friends, or even therapists whenever they needed support. He also championed engaging in hobbies, volunteering, or exploring creative outlets as vital ways to recharge and improve balance in their lives.

Brian concluded his talk by leaving participants with three crucial messages for navigating high-pressure environments: stress management is personal, balance is achievable, and motivation is maintainable.

▲ Overwhelmed and out of steam – burnout is real.

REIMAGINING HERITAGE THROUGH AUGMENTED REALITY INNOVATION

WOU is pushing the boundaries of cultural engagement through a research project that redefines how younger generations interact with heritage sites – by using gamified Augmented Reality (AR) technology.

The project, using the iconic Kellie's Castle in Perak as a case study, was recently showcased at the Second International Symposium on the Transition from Digital Technologies to the Digital Society, held from 16–19 June 2025. The conference, jointly organised by Minjiang University, China, and European University Cyprus, brought together researchers and experts, exchanging insights on digital transformation.

Representing WOU was Assoc Prof Ts Dr Andrew Tan Kian Lam, Dean of School of Digital Technology (DiGiT), who presented a research paper titled 'Gamified Augmented Reality Mobile Application for Interactive Digital Heritage Experience at Kellie's Castle Malaysia', co-authored with fellow WOU academics Assoc Prof Dr Lee Heng Wei and Dr Racheal Poh.

According to Dr Tan, the research addresses a growing concern: the declining interest in cultural heritage among younger Malaysians. Addressing the audience virtually, he shared how the team developed a mobile-based AR application that blends real-time overlays, 3D modelling, and interactive game-based learning to create an immersive virtual experience for users, particularly youth.

Dr Tan further elaborated that usability assessments showed a marked improvement in user engagement and understanding of cultural content, particularly among younger participants. He added that the combination of interactive storytelling and gamified tasks allowed users to develop stronger emotional connections to the heritage site.

"Our research highlights the potential of AR technology in promoting sustainable cultural education and bridging generational gaps in heritage appreciation. This is especially crucial for communities and countries with rich cultural legacies seeking to leverage digital innovation to enhance engagement and access," said Dr Tan.

He added, "Through this project, we've shown how technology can do more than just preserve history – it can bring it to life. By creating an immersive, gamified experience, we're not only capturing the attention of younger audiences but also rethinking how historical learning can be made more inclusive, interactive, and impactful."

This initiative by DiGiT reflects WOU's growing role in digital transformation research, particularly at the intersection of culture, technology, and education.

As the university moves forward, it remains committed to advancing interdisciplinary efforts that strengthen global academic collaboration and deepen cross-sectoral partnerships in the digital age.

▲ Assoc Prof Dr Andrew Tan Kian Lam.

FROM 70 SCHOOLS TO 360 YOUNG MINDS: WOU STEM WORKSHOP SERIES SPARKS A STEM RIPPLE EFFECT

▲ From building bridges to mastering 3D printing, Android app development, and AR microbit, WOU's STEM workshops have inspired hands-on innovation and equipped participants with future-ready skills.

The WOU STEM Workshop series, launched on 8 May 2025, has officially concluded – marking a significant milestone in the effort to cultivate future-ready teaching strategies and rekindle passion for STEM education in schools.

Spanning four hands-on sessions from May through July, the workshops were designed to help 120 primary and secondary school teachers across 70 schools in Penang's Northeast District bridge the gap between theory and practice. Each session fused real-world application with interactive learning, empowering teachers to reimagine how they engage students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

FROM BUILDING BRIDGES TO CREATING FUTURES

The inaugural session kicked off with a bridge-building challenge – an exercise that cleverly disguised engineering principles such as structural integrity and load dynamics within a fun and competitive format. What seemed simple quickly evolved into a powerful lesson on design thinking, teamwork, and critical problem-solving.

Subsequent sessions took teachers into the world of 3D printing, Android app development, and augmented reality (AR) using Micro:bit devices – exposing them to frontier technologies that are shaping how young people learn, think, and create. For many teachers, these experiences marked their first interaction with such tools, opening doors to new pedagogical possibilities.

"This helped me realise how simple materials can be used to explain big concepts," said Cikgu Harun from SK Bukit Gelugor. "I'm excited to bring this energy back to my students."

Mr Jason Ong of SMK Taman Sri Rambai shared, "The hands-on format and supportive facilitators gave me the confidence to try new methods. It was energising to learn alongside peers from other schools."

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: A RIPPLE EFFECT OF INNOVATION

The true power of the workshops lies in their multiplier effect. Each teacher returned to their school tasked with guiding students through a STEM project inspired by what they learned. These student projects were submitted for evaluation, with top entries from each session to be recognised in an upcoming online award ceremony.

In total, more than 360 students across 70 schools were impacted. The student-led projects are already generating excitement and momentum for future STEM-based initiatives. This downstream impact is what WOU and the Penang State Education Department set out to achieve: equipping educators as catalysts for change in the classroom.

▲ Tuan Mohamad Zawawi (right) holds one of the bridge models.

Tuan Mohamad Zawawi Bin Ahmad, Deputy Director (Learning Sector), Penang State Education Department, praised the initiative as a model of forward-thinking collaboration.

"By equipping educators with up-to-date STEM knowledge, we are sowing the seeds for a new generation of innovators who will drive Malaysia's future economy."

FLEXIBLE LEARNING, REAL-WORLD RELEVANCE

Conducted by WOU's School of Technology and Engineering Science (STE), the sessions maintained small-group formats (maximum 30 participants per workshop) to foster peer collaboration and meaningful exchange. Teachers earned CPD credits and joint certification from WOU and the District Education Office, while students gained co-curricular PAJSK points – ensuring tangible academic recognition for all involved.

The initiative reflects WOU's broader mission to future-proof Malaysia's STEM education pipeline through flexible, industry-aligned learning. With fully online and hybrid BTech degrees and micro-credential programmes in AI, automation, and digital innovation, WOU continues to lead in preparing both educators and working professionals for the demands of the digital economy.

"The goal is not only to train teachers, but to inspire a multiplier effect," said Assoc Prof Ts Dr Sean Tan, Dean of WOU's School of Technology and Engineering Science. "Through this, we hope to ignite curiosity and innovation that lasts far beyond the workshop."

FROM THE LAB TO THE CLASSROOM – AND BEYOND

As the curtain falls on the inaugural STEM Workshop series, its success sends a clear message: When teachers are equipped with the right tools and support, they become powerful changemakers in shaping the minds of tomorrow.

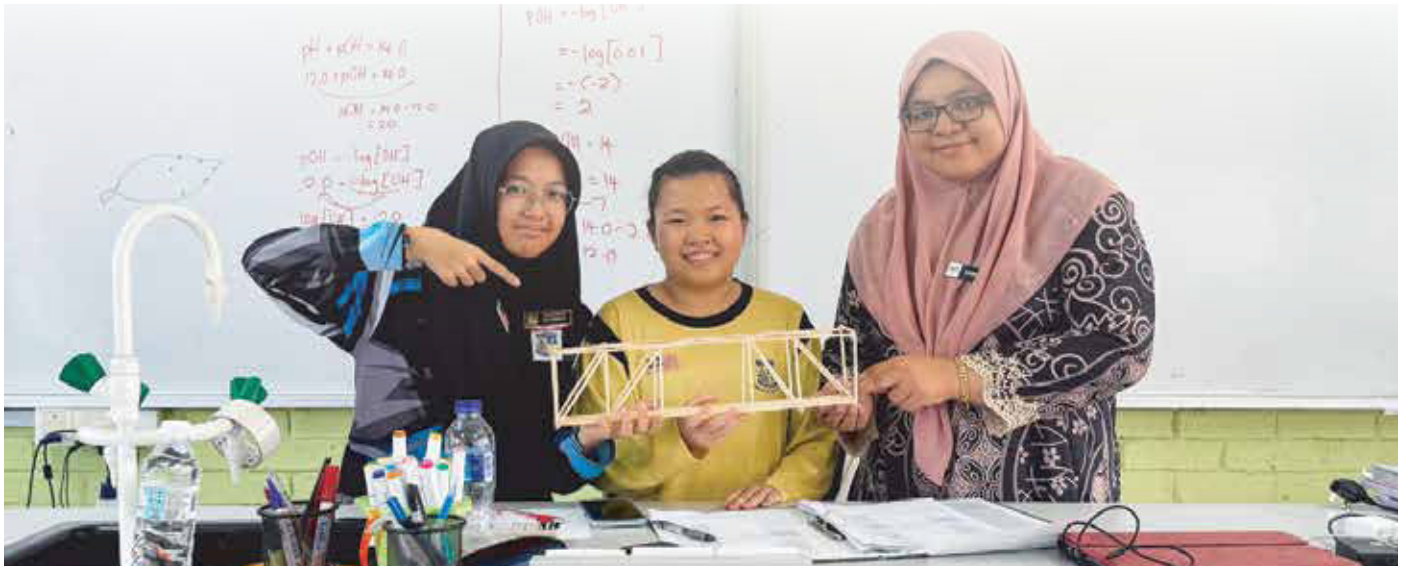
This isn't the end of WOU's efforts – it's the beginning of a wider journey to make STEM more engaging, more accessible, and more relevant for Malaysian classrooms.

▲ From idea to interface, proud of the outcome.

▲ A group photo with some of the participants after the workshop.

WOU WORKSHOP IGNITES STEM MOMENTUM AT SMK (P) SRI MUTIARA

The university-led series of facilitator workshops inspired one school's journey from after-class projects to state STEM competitions and a growing culture of hands-on learning.



▲ Nor Suhaila Binti Abdul Rahim with students who participated in the STEM competition.

A hands-on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) workshop at WOU has sparked an unexpected ripple effect at a Penang secondary school – culminating in its students qualifying for a national-level STEM competition.

For Nor Suhaila Binti Abdul Rahim, a Science teacher at SMK (P) Sri Mutiara, the bridge-building workshop she attended at WOU in May completely reshaped how she approached science and engineering in the classroom.

"Before this, I only relied on Google and diagrams to learn about bridge building. But during the workshop, WOU facilitators shared creative and practical techniques that helped me understand the process deeply. Using simple materials like wooden sticks, I successfully built a bridge model and brought that knowledge back to my students," said Nor Suhaila.

The workshop was part of a district-wide initiative by WOU in collaboration with the Penang Northeast District Education Office. The programme, comprising four interactive sessions, has benefited over 120 teachers from 70 schools across the district, aiming to empower them with practical, hands-on STEM teaching methods.

Nor Suhaila described the workshop as a turning point, particularly for teachers with no prior experience in STEM, in helping them gain the confidence to embrace the field.

Armed with new insights and confidence, Nor Suhaila went on to establish a STEM Club at her school, introducing her students to hands-on challenges and bringing the workshop's spirit directly into her classroom.

"With the guidance and teaching tips shared by the WOU facilitators, I was able to pass on what I learned to my students. Their enthusiasm motivated us to take part in the district-level STEM competition, and we were thrilled when we qualified for the state-level stage. Although we didn't win, the students felt proud and happy because their hard work had taken them that far."

"The STEM Club gives my students a platform to explore science and engineering beyond the textbook. At the same time, it allows me to share what I've learned with them and guide them to explore their creativity, think critically, and experiment with their own ideas," she said.

Exuding the same spirit and passion for STEM, her students took on the bridge-building challenge with curiosity and determination – gaining not just technical skills, but also confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of teamwork.

"If our design didn't work, we'd try again until we succeed. We did plenty of research, looked at different types of bridges, and kept practising. To friends interested in STEM, I'd say: keep going. It doesn't matter even if you lose a competition – it's all part of the learning experience," said Form 3 student, Miz Natalyz Fandya Binti Mohd Noor Fazli.

Her schoolmate and fellow Form 3 student, Joey Heng Bee Xuen, echoed the spirit of collaboration:

"At first, I just focused on building the bridge without really thinking about how strong it needed to be. But as my friends shared their ideas, we put them all together and ended up with a stronger, better model."

By equipping teachers with the right tools to make STEM hands-on and relatable, WOU aims to bring the subject to life in more Penang schools, fostering a culture of curiosity, creativity, and innovation one classroom, one project, one student at a time.

REIMAGINING BUSINESS EDUCATION FOR AN AI-DRIVEN, STARTUP-CENTRIC WORLD

▲ Assoc Prof Dr Gary Tan

In today's hyper-digital world, where AI (Artificial Intelligence) is reshaping industries and startups are redefining success, the future of business education lies not in tradition, but in transformation. In this first instalment of a four-part series, Assoc Prof Dr Gary Tan shares his insights on why business degrees remain crucial, and how they are being reimagined for a new generation of learners.

WHY BUSINESS EDUCATION STILL MATTERS – AND HOW IT'S BEING REDEFINED

Why does business education need to evolve – not just to remain relevant, but to lead in an AI-driven world?

Business education must evolve beyond traditional frameworks to thrive in an AI-driven world. Simply remaining relevant isn't enough; it needs to lead. AI is fundamentally reshaping industries, demanding new skill sets centred on critical thinking, ethical considerations, data analytics, and human-AI collaboration. Future business leaders need to understand AI's strategic implications, how to leverage its power for innovation, and navigate its societal impact. An evolved curriculum prepares them to not just adapt to technological shifts, but to proactively steer businesses towards sustainable growth and responsible AI integration, making them architects of the future, not just responders.

What do people often get wrong about business degrees in the age of tech disruption and startup hype?

It's a common misconception that business degrees are irrelevant in today's tech-driven, startup-hyped world. While practical experience is undoubtedly vital, a business degree provides foundational knowledge in areas like finance, marketing, strategy, and leadership, which can help startups avoid common pitfalls. Furthermore, MBAs, often perceived as solely for corporate climbers, offer invaluable networking opportunities, fundraising knowledge, and a holistic understanding of how to scale a venture, directly addressing the complex challenges faced by startups.

In your view, what are the essential new capabilities a business graduate must have today compared to a decade ago?

Beyond the foundational business principles, essential new capabilities include a strong grasp of AI literacy and data fluency, enabling them to understand how AI and big data function, interpret insights, and leverage these technologies for strategic decision-making and innovation. Digital transformation acumen is crucial for navigating and leading organisational change driven by technology. The ability to demonstrate adaptability and resilience in rapidly shifting environments, embracing ambiguity, and committing to continuous lifelong learning are also paramount. Graduates must also possess human-AI collaboration skills, effectively working alongside AI tools to augment human creativity and critical thinking. Finally, a deep understanding of ethical leadership and sustainability is non-negotiable, encompassing the ethical implications of technology and business practices, coupled with a commitment to building sustainable and responsible enterprises.

How is the role of business schools shifting – from knowledge delivery to capability building?

A decade ago, the emphasis was often on imparting established theories, frameworks, and historical case studies, equipping students with a foundational understanding of business functions. Today, business schools recognise that graduates need to do more than just know. This shift to capability building means designing curricula that foster critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, and the ability to apply interdisciplinary insights to real-world challenges. It involves experiential learning, such as consulting projects, simulations, and internships, where students hone skills like data analysis, ethical decision-making, digital literacy, and human-AI collaboration. The goal is to cultivate agile leaders who can navigate ambiguity, innovate continuously, and effectively leverage emerging technologies to create value and drive sustainable growth in an increasingly volatile and interconnected global economy.

Assoc Prof Dr Gary Tan is Executive Dean of the School of Business and Administration at WOU. A recognised expert in organisational leadership, managerial finance, and economics, he is committed to cultivating agile, future-ready business leaders for the evolving global economy.

GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS AND THE ONE EARTH BALANCE SHEET – A BLUEPRINT FOR INCLUSIVE GROWTH

▲ A gathering of international experts and thought leaders in Bhutan.

On 19 and 20 June 2025, WOU's George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies (GIOAS) partnered with Tarayana Foundation to organise the Conference on Operationalising GNH (Gross National Happiness) in Bhutan and Beyond at Bhutan's famed Dungkar Dzong in Pangbisa, Paro. The conference was part of a global conversation involving key leaders, experts, academics, and strategists on village-led development models, policy strategies, and ways to translate GNH into practical frameworks for socio-economic development. In this Q&A, GIOAS Chairman and WOU Board member Tan Sri Andrew Sheng provides a compelling take on how values-driven approaches can shape our shared future.

What was the vision behind organising the 'Conference on Operationalising GNH in Bhutan and Beyond'?

Simply put, the Conference aimed at taking Bhutan's big idea of GNH, learning the lessons so far in implementing GNH and hopefully, scaling its work globally. Everyone admires GNH's focus on well-being, culture, and nature over mere GDP, but the real challenge is transforming that philosophy into practical systems we can actually use. I personally believe that GNH is the right way to go to deal with the big issues of climate change and re-thinking about social harmony and economic transformation.

We brought a diverse range of people together to figure out how to blend inner well-being with outer systems like education, finance, and digital tools to tackle big challenges like climate change and social inequality. This conference was to find and share real, working models, especially at the village level, that put GNH into practice. We want to create adaptable tools and policies so communities everywhere can shape their own development, inspired by Bhutan, but built for their unique needs.

Bhutan's GNH framework has long challenged the global focus on GDP. Why do you believe the world needs this kind of development model now more than ever?

The world is currently in a state of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) transition, with climate shocks, resource pressures, and fragmented global systems. GDP alone can't steer us through volatility where food, water, and stability are at risk, whilst inequality at people and planet levels are deteriorating. Worse, top-down frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are stalling because they struggle to translate global goals into local action. GNH offers a values-driven, holistic approach grounded in community. It prioritises resilience and well-being, integrates ecological limits, and respects cultural context and emotional and spiritual values. As nations forge independent paths amid uncertainty, GNH's focus on place-based, balanced development is a practical blueprint for navigating complexity and turning intention into impact where it matters most.

In your keynote, you described the One Earth Balance Sheet as a way to move beyond GDP. How can this framework help communities take greater ownership of their development?

The One Earth Balance Sheet concept flips the script by putting real-time, local data directly in communities' hands. A global balance sheet is built from the smallest components, such as individuals, corporations or villages. Instead of relying on distant top-down GDP metrics, grass-root villages track what they value most, such as clean water, forests, cultural heritage, and community health. With this clarity, communities can be empowered to lead decisions like prioritising forest conservation over a mining proposal. The framework strengthens local governance by integrating traditional knowledge with real-time data, where villages can design regenerative projects aligned with their context. Ultimately, this approach shifts power from top-down planning to grounded action.

In your view, how can we ensure that development is truly inclusive – socially, economically, and culturally?

To work towards true inclusivity, we must start by centring communities as the architects and operators of their future. A bottom-up approach will need multiple moving parts. For starters, frameworks like the One Earth Balance Sheet which tracks real-time ecological health, cultural assets, and local wellbeing ensures that local priorities are what drive decisions, and not external agendas. With advancements in digital technologies, we now have the ability to account for each individual's well-being – making visible their aspirations, challenges, and contributions. Second, cultural values and ecological boundaries must be embedded into economic planning, and be made specific to each community. For instance, the "wealth" of a forest community would be different from that of a coastal town's. Third, practical systems such as equitable finance and regenerative design must be paired with investments in mental resilience and ethical leadership. The villagers become owners, rather than on-lookers of their own future. At the national level, the state help to empower village communities to work together to cope with their own challenges and support with infrastructure, resources and finance.

What mindsets or skills do future leaders and professionals need to thrive in this shifting landscape?

Leadership will exist broadly across two levels: top-down and bottom-up. Top-down leaders must cultivate humility, deep listening, enabling, and devolving power, as opposed to imposing solutions. Top-down decisions must be sensitive to deep values within society, culture, religion and traditions. Bottom-up leaders (e.g., village coordinators, local NGOs) will need grounded advocacy skills to articulate community needs and mobilise collective action locally, and be literate in new technologies such as real-time balance sheets. Both require inner resilience and ethical courage to prioritise well-being over extraction.

▲ Tan Sri Andrew Sheng (right), takes part in the forum session.

Do you see potential for a village-led, grassroots development model in Malaysia? How can higher education play a role?

Yes, but Malaysia must decentralise power to really pursue this model. Some experiments are being tried, such as the Smart Omni Village pilot project in Sapulut, Sabah, but the primary obstacle is the lack of autonomy and understanding at the village level. What is required is the empowerment of villages by giving them knowledge, resources and funding. The Bhutanese model hinges on listening to local wisdoms, co-sharing, and cooperating with each other, and leadership by example.

Universities can train graduates who are context translators that can bridge local wisdom and policy and host living labs where solutions emerge from local needs. Malaysia has the potential to build a vibrant Malaysia Knowledge Network – an open, federated ecosystem of academic institutions, local practitioners, and communities – that contributes not only to national development but also to the Global Creative Commons. Such a network would make shared, place-based wisdom a vital part of our collective intelligence as a planet.

The full-length version of this Q&A can be read at www.wou.edu.my/newsroom.

About George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies

The George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies (GIOAS) was established in December 2018 as an independent, not-for-profit institute that seeks to explore ideas and complexity within open societies. It operates as an integral part of Wawasan Open University, embracing the principle that progress is open-ended. By providing a dynamic platform for thought leaders to connect, network, and exchange ideas, it aims to bring global perspectives into ongoing dialogue in Penang and Malaysia.

WOU TRAINS OVER 60 PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN CRITICAL FIRST AID TO STRENGTHEN SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM

▲ Participants gather for the hands-on session during the First Aid Training Workshop.

Preschool educators play a crucial role in ensuring the safety of young children. To enhance their emergency preparedness, WOU, in collaboration with the Penang Kindergarten Teachers Association (PGTPP) and Pantai Hospital Penang, held a First Aid Training Workshop on 20 April 2025 at its main campus.

The half-day session welcomed over 60 teachers from across Penang, offering practical training in CPR, AED use, and other key emergency response techniques for children and infants. The workshop, organised by WOU's School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (SEHS), was led by medical professionals from Pantai Hospital Penang.

"In an emergency, knowing CPR and how to use an AED can be the difference between life and death," said nurse Poh Chun Bing from Pantai Hospital.

PGTPP President and WOU adjunct lecturer Ng Chit Peng commended the teachers for their dedication, while SEHS Dean Prof Dr Anna Christina Abdullah underscored the importance of practical skills in educator training.

The initiative reflects WOU's continued efforts to empower early childhood educators through hands-on learning that builds both competence and confidence in the classroom.

FUTURE TECHNOLOGISTS TAKE THE SPOTLIGHT AT WOU'S ANNUAL INNOVATION PLATFORM

WOU's annual Technology and Innovation Exhibition (WOUTech'25), held on 21 June 2025, celebrated innovation and creativity as final-year students presented their projects to academics and industry experts.

Chairperson Ts Dhanaletchmi N. Narayanasamy described the event as a platform for students to transform bold ideas into real-world solutions. Assoc Prof Ts Dr Sean Tan Koon Tatt, Dean of the School of Technology and Engineering Science added that the showcase reflects WOU's mission to equip students with critical thinking and problem-solving skills for societal impact.

The event featured a keynote by Dr Teo Teow Wee of TTVision Technologies, who spoke on the integration of AI, drones, and sustainability in solar energy diagnostics.

Awards were given for outstanding projects, including:
- **Best Idea Innovation:** Joey Chua Siew Yen (WOU) for 'Human Emotion Classification Based on EEG Data from Stroke Patient'
- **Best Poster:** Yuveneswaran Loganazan (WOU) for 'Smart Irrigation System'
- **Best Presenter:** Ong Shu Han (INTI) for 'EV Charging at Petrol Station with Notification Keypad'

Joey Chua encouraged future students to align their projects with current industry needs, noting how the experience boosted her confidence and opened doors to career opportunities.

WOUTech'25 reaffirmed WOU's dedication to producing industry-ready graduates through experiential learning and innovation.

▲ The exhibition highlights project showcases, engaging sessions, and meaningful interactions among participants at WOUTech'25.

MEET THE WOU GRADUATE BEHIND PENANG'S BEST-KEPT GUJARATI CULINARY SECRET

▲ Vishaal and his mother, Preeti, beam with pride outside their cosy family-run eatery.

At just 27, WOU alumnus Vishaal Manoj Kumar is the co-founder of Preeti's Farsan, a cosy George Town café serving authentic North Indian vegetarian delicacies – a rarity in Penang. Named after his mother, Preeti, the venture began as a home-based business that Vishaal helped digitise during the pandemic while pursuing his Bachelor of Business (Hons) in Sales and Marketing at WOU.

"WOU's programme gave me a strong foundation in marketing and customer relationship management," he says. Applying lessons on branding, market positioning, and consumer behaviour, he built a loyal following through consistent brand identity, targeted ads, and engaging storytelling.

Juggling studies, work, and business was demanding, but WOU's flexible approach made it possible. "Being on the student council was one of the best parts of my journey. The leadership, communication, and teamwork skills I gained are central to how I run my business today."

Five years on, Preeti's Farsan has grown into a thriving café rooted in tradition and innovation, with plans to expand. Vishaal's advice to aspiring entrepreneurs: "Your social base is your most prized possession. Network as much as you can – it opens doors and helps you grow."

His journey reflects WOU's mission to equip working adults with practical skills, entrepreneurial thinking, and the resilience to thrive in competitive markets.

WOU EMPOWERS CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONAL TO REACH NEW CAREER MILESTONE

When Emma Sofia Haime Abdullah enrolled at WOU in 2019, she had one mission in mind: to grow professionally while continuing to support her family. As the only daughter of a single mother who had just retired, she had entered the workforce right after her diploma to ease the financial burden at home.

"I chose WOU because it aligned perfectly with my career aspirations – a flexible and industry-relevant degree that could fit around my full-time job. The structure of the programme allowed me to continue working and still work towards my academic goals," shared Emma, who pursued the Bachelor of Technology (Honours) in Construction Management (BTCM).

Her determination was put to the test in 2020, during her second year in the programme, when she got married and the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

"I had to juggle my new responsibilities as a wife, balance my studies with long, gruelling work days and constant travel demands as a Quantity Surveyor. It was challenging having to endure the isolation and adapt to uncertainties from the pandemic – but WOU's online learning platform and the support from tutors really helped me stay on track," Emma recounted.

Despite the many obstacles, Emma persevered – and her hard work bore fruit. In January 2025, she was promoted to Director of Operations and Business Development at Art Projeks Sdn Bhd, a project management consultancy in Selangor.

After years of late nights, personal sacrifices, and unwavering commitment, Emma has successfully completed her studies and will be receiving her scroll at WOU's upcoming convocation this November.

▲ Emma Sofia Haime Abdullah at WOUTech '24.

HELPING CHILDREN THRIVE: FROM WOU GRADUATE TO CHILD ADVOCATE

For over three decades, Mary Anne Joseph has been at the forefront of supporting children with special needs – especially those on the autism spectrum – through her work in behaviour modification and early intervention. A recent graduate of WOU's Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Psychology programme, Mary Anne exemplifies lifelong learning and compassionate advocacy.

Mary Anne's journey began long before she enrolled at WOU. With her first degree in Special Education from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, she started working as a Home Programmer, conducting hands-on training with children and their parents to manage challenging behaviours. "My motto has always been: Train the Parent, Train the Child," she says. "When families are empowered with knowledge and skills, the child's growth becomes a shared success."

Her career spans continents, including founding a special needs centre in Al Khartoum, Sudan, and offering community training, parent workshops, and counselling. She has seen the emotional toll on families, especially mothers. "The gap is not just in services for children," she explains. "There's also a dire need for emotional support for parents."

Pursuing her Psychology degree at WOU helped her bridge practical experience with theoretical insight. "It was eight years of 'sweating tears and blood', but worth every moment," she reflects. "Studying as a working adult gave me a deeper understanding of the psychological needs of both children and adults, including those facing trauma." Her academic journey also led her to unexpected paths, such as counselling women on death row and survivors of domestic abuse.

Mary Anne credits her academic success to the dedicated lecturers and the supportive staff at WOU's Ipoh Regional Centre. "I was on the Dean's List once, and I owe that to the constant encouragement I received, especially from Puan Irmadura," she says. "Now, my son is also pursuing his degree at WOU. It's come full circle."

In her recent article 'Helping Children Thrive', she emphasises the urgency of early intervention between ages 0 to 6 and ongoing parent-teacher collaboration. "I've seen too many children with mild learning difficulties placed in special needs classes when they could thrive in mainstream settings – if only we had the right support systems," she shares. She also calls for better training in behaviour modification and stronger emotional support networks for educators and parents.

Mary Anne continues to share her expertise through seminars and workshops, and she dreams of writing a book to pass on her insights to fellow professionals. Her mission is deeply rooted in empathy and structure: "Children thrive on consistency. Behaviour modification is not just a technique – it's a way to instil confidence and dignity."

Mary Anne's mission, in her own words: "Observation through behaviour modification increases the positive attitude of humanity."

▼Mary Anne during one of her sessions with school kids in Ipoh.

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