“I am too old to pick up new skills” is a common refrain amongst many adults. Yet, science has long dispelled the notion that learning ability is reduced in adults. “Adults are as good, if not better, in acquiring new information. Older brains are better at complex problem-solving and information synthesis than younger brains,” said Associate Professor Ong Lin Seng, Executive Director of NTU’s Centre for Professional and Continuing Education (PaCE@NTU).

Whereas in the past, a university degree almost guaranteed one with a stable career for life, the same cannot be said of this era of digitalisation and technological disruption. PaCE@NTU was thus established to help adult learners upskill (to go deeper into something you’re familiar with) and reskill (to learn a different skill) in order to stay relevant and remain globally competitive in the modern economy.

**Choose how you learn**

Prof Ong, who has a strong background in engineering, is clear-eyed about the impacts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, otherwise known as Industry 4.0, which promises to drastically change the industrial landscape, as well as the way we work.

“As technology becomes more sophisticated and integral to all sorts of businesses, the shelf life of skills also becomes shorter. Hence, consistent engagement in lifelong learning is the key to maintaining our continued employability,” Prof Ong explained.

Yet, most working adults have allowed themselves to believe that continued education is a luxury they cannot afford, said Prof Ong. This is where PaCE@NTU steps in to reduce the friction of going back to school.

For instance, PaCE@NTU offers what is known as ‘blended courses’ consisting of both online and offline sessions so that adult learners need not be physically on campus all the time to access course content. Prof Ong also noted that the Delta-NTU Corporate Lab is developing online training content distributed on a mobile app learning platform. 14 funded courses and 27 bite-sized modular courses are now accessible via the mobile app, allowing adult learners to learn on the go.

However, Prof Ong believes that face-to-face interaction with lecturers and peers is still crucial for effective learning. “Although adults are generally more self-directed than children, they still require guidance and support throughout their studies,” he shared.

**Meeting the demands of industry**

If employability is the main impetus for lifelong learning, then the curriculum offered to adult learners at NTU must align with the needs of industry. Hence, in order to maintain the relevancy of the courses it provides, PaCE@NTU works closely
with corporate leaders and trade associations, listening to their needs to tailor education programmes.

“We want to develop industry-specific courses for upskilling and reskilling, as well as for skill qualifications recognised and endorsed by the industry,” said Prof Ong, giving credit to NTU’s world-renowned faculty and strong industry connections for their efforts in rolling out high quality programmes for adult learners.

PaCE@NTU has also been exploring deeper partnerships with schools, colleges, and corporate laboratories at NTU to carry out courses that are “stackable” towards a certain competency-based qualification. This makes the notion of becoming a student again appear less daunting and grants adult learners greater flexibility in planning their own skills upgrading, knowing full well that their efforts will pay off once they’ve ticked off all the items on a curriculum checklist.

“As technology becomes more sophisticated and integral to all sorts of businesses, the shelf life of skills also becomes shorter.”

— Associate Professor Ong Lin Seng

Funding lifelong learning

Another key philosophy of PaCE@NTU is that no one should be denied the opportunity to upgrade themselves simply because they cannot afford it. Prof Ong mentioned that Singaporeans and PRs are eligible for subsidies of up to 70 percent when enrolling in SkillsFuture Singapore-supported
NTU Alumni Affairs Office to organise bi-monthly talks and interaction sessions. The message that Prof Ong wants to send is clear: acknowledge the need to improve your knowledge and skills before it is too late, and NTU stands ready to help.

“If jobs and tasks can be automated, workers will slowly become redundant over time, and jobs will disappear from the market. We may not know when it will happen, but it will happen progressively. It is therefore critical for the people of Singapore to engage in lifelong learning,” Prof Ong emphasised.

courses, adding that working adults over 40 years old are eligible for subsidies of up to 90 percent of course fees.

“We also partner with the National Silver Academy, the Employment and Employability Institute, and the NTUC Union Training Assistance Programme to provide more financial support for those who lack financial means,” he said.

Prof Ong also reminded NTU alumni that they each have S$1,600 in course credits which can be used to fund their studies at NTU. Furthermore, to inspire more alumni to engage in lifelong learning, PaCE@NTU is partnering with the NTU Alumni Affairs Office to organise bi-monthly talks and interaction sessions. The message that Prof Ong wants to send is clear: acknowledge the need to improve your knowledge and skills before it is too late, and NTU stands ready to help. “If jobs and tasks can be automated, workers will slowly become redundant over time, and jobs will disappear from the market. We may not know when it will happen, but it will happen progressively. It is therefore critical for the people of Singapore to engage in lifelong learning,” Prof Ong emphasised.