

I learnt more from Xiaohongshu than from years of online courses

Singapore has spent billions making lifelong learning affordable and accessible. Now, there's a need to rethink the format.

Kah Hin Chai

The next evolution of university lifelong learning is about learning that fits life's rhythm, not the other way around. How many New Year's resolutions have we already abandoned? Research shows that behavioural goals succeed where outcome goals fail. Committing to "read a chapter before bedtime" proves far more sustainable than pledging to "read 12 books a year". One embeds learning into life's rhythm; the other treats it as an achievement to be conquered. This distinction is crucial for how universities approach lifelong learning – and my own experience illustrates why.

A DEAN'S CONFESSION

In 2025, I started following Chinese social media behemoth Xiaohongshu (also known as RedNote), which commands over 300 million monthly users, to learn what Chinese students think about National University of Singapore (NUS) graduate programmes.

Many Chinese students share their views and experience of graduate studies on the lifestyle platform. This was useful in my previous role as vice-dean of graduate programmes for design and engineering, where I was responsible for student recruitment.

However, in recent months, I found myself engaging with some content on the platform that went beyond direct use for work: problem-solving, presentation skills and managing people – along with travel posts about Bali, safaris and business-class flights. Why? The platform fits seamlessly into the fragments of daily life: while queuing for food in the canteen, during quick breaks between meetings, or in the evenings when I am too exhausted to work on the laptop.

I have acquired more practical knowledge from Xiaohongshu in recent months than from years of sporadic attempts at courses with online learning platforms Coursera and edX.

Platforms like Coursera and edX offer structured, high-quality content – but they demand something most professionals cannot reliably give: a dedicated block of time outside work. Because such time is often shoehorned into an already overfilled calendar, courses are started and abandoned, or rushed through on weekends in a state of cognitive overload, with no immediate application in mind. The learning leaves little trace.

This is an uncomfortable admission for someone who is now a dean responsible for continuing and lifelong education. But it reveals something important about the challenges of keeping at lifelong learning.

TWO PARADIGMS OF LEARNING

Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative represents one of the world's most ambitious commitments to lifelong learning. It has succeeded in making courses affordable and accessible at scale, removing financial barriers that once inhibited working adults from pursuing professional development. Thousands of programmes are now available that are generously subsidised, across industries and skill levels.

Yet lifelong learning remains uncommon, both in Singapore and internationally, despite similar initiatives. Conversations with potential learners reveal a pattern: The challenge is no longer affordability or availability, but integration.

This points to a fundamental distinction between two paradigms of learning, both valid but serving different needs.



Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu offers something unique: lifestyle-embedded learning. Content exists where one's attention already is, in formats matching how one truly lives. There are no credentials, structured curricula or completion requirements – just learning that fits into the fragments of the user's day. ST PHOTO AZMI ATHNI

Coursera and edX – as well as Singapore's SkillsFuture-supported programmes – are brilliantly designed for achievement-driven learning: set a goal, dedicate time, commit to finishing and earn the credential. This approach is especially effective for individuals aiming to gain credentials and who seek career transformation. It is structured, rigorous and recognised.

Xiaohongshu offers something unique: lifestyle-embedded learning. Content exists where your attention already is, in formats matching how you truly live. On this platform, there are no credentials, structured curricula or completion requirements – just learning that fits into the fragments of your day.

The platform, along with the likes of TikTok, is built around interests rather than relationships from the outset. While Facebook and Instagram have since evolved towards interest-based recommendations, their users' mental model remains anchored in social connection – people still open them primarily to check on friends and family.

Xiaohongshu users, by contrast, approach the platform to discover and find answers, making them far more receptive to knowledge content. This difference in user mindset, more than the algorithm alone, is what makes Xiaohongshu structurally more conducive to learning.

URBAN LIFESTYLES

While Singapore and China differ in many ways, the lifestyle constraints of high-density Asian cities are remarkably similar: long commutes, compressed schedules, queueing, mobile-first behaviour, fragmented attention. Xiaohongshu is designed for this reality: two- to three-minute videos, subtitled for viewing with volume off, easy sharing with friends, surfacing content when you have only 90 seconds of attention.

This is not exclusive to Asia. Commuters in London, subway riders in New York and anyone balancing work and family responsibilities face similar fragmentation.

Universities, meanwhile, still structure education around fixed learning periods: 13-week courses requiring three to four hours weekly, intensive three-day courses that sometimes stretch into the weekend, evening classes involving campus commutes, and strict deadlines.

The core model remains – learning as a separate activity that demands dedicated time.

DOES MICRO-LEARNING SACRIFICE DEPTH?

I understand, too, how sceptics might doubt this: Surely two- to three-minute videos or posts of fewer than 1,000 Chinese characters produce shallow learning compared with structured courses?

This is valid only when the content is poorly designed. Micro-learning pedagogy focuses each short segment on a single learning objective with immediate application. The depth comes from sustained daily practice, not marathon sessions. Spaced repetition – watching three-minute videos daily during the commute and applying lessons immediately in meetings – can lead to higher retention than a three-hour workshop attended months ago.

Since becoming dean last October, I have often found myself representing the school at official events. I have discovered that short, bite-sized videos on body language and commanding stage presence, watched the night before, act as timely reminders – not as substitutes for experience, but as recalibrations that no scheduled course could provide at exactly the right moment.

Others dismiss this as "dumbed down" at their own peril. The question is not whether micro-learning is rigorous enough. It is whether our traditional formats are effective enough for people who will not or cannot carve out dedicated learning time.

If lifestyle-integrated learning proves effective for capability-building, universities and policymakers must make choices. We have invested heavily in achievement-based infrastructure. Our metrics depend on completion rates, not three-minute modules.

The challenge is not abandoning achievement-based learning – it remains essential for credentials, structured knowledge and disciplines where depth and mentorship cannot be compressed: medicine, law or engineering...

The challenge is adding complementary approaches for busy working adults who are pressed for time. Micro-learning is an overdue addition. This requires measuring success through sustained engagement, not just completion rates. We also need to design programmes around lifestyle constraints rather than assuming learners have uninterrupted hours to spare.

Conversations with colleagues and potential learners at NUS reveal a clear pattern: Many seeking immediate capability-building face a challenge that is not about affordability (Singapore's subsidies are generous) or availability (programmes are abundant). It is about lifestyle-integrated learning.

THE HABIT FORMATION HYPOTHESIS

The case for lifestyle-integrated learning rests on a hypothesis: Sustained micro-learning habits may produce better long-term outcomes than sporadic intensive learning.

The traditional model follows a pattern where learners enrol in a course, commit three to four hours weekly for 13 weeks, complete it, and then forget most of what they learnt within months. When the next need arises, the cycle repeats.

The lifestyle-integrated model works differently: The daily five-minute engagement lends itself better to immediate application in real situations. Sustained over months, this practice becomes habitual, and learning compounds over time.

This presents a measurement challenge. We count course completions easily, but how do we measure sustainable learning habits? Traditional metrics may be inadequate.

We might instead track sustained engagement over time such as behavioural change

indicators, time-to-next-learning, or network formation. These metrics are messier than completion rates, but they may offer more honest measures of whether lifelong learning actually works.

THE NEXT FRONTIER

If lifestyle-integrated learning proves effective for capability-building, universities and policymakers must make choices. We have invested heavily in achievement-based infrastructure. Our metrics depend on completion rates. Our faculty designs 13-week courses, not three-minute modules.

The challenge is not abandoning achievement-based learning – it remains essential for credentials, structured knowledge and disciplines where depth and mentorship cannot be compressed: medicine, law or engineering. It is also the natural mode for 18- to 24-year-olds who can still dedicate sustained time to learning.

The challenge is adding complementary approaches for busy working adults who are pressed for time. Micro-learning is an overdue addition. This requires measuring success through sustained engagement, not just completion rates. We also need to design programmes around lifestyle constraints rather than assuming learners have uninterrupted hours to spare.

Universities have the expertise, credibility, research foundation and teaching talent. What we need – building on the tremendous foundation of access and affordability that public investment has created – is the willingness to experiment with formats that meet people where they actually are.

FROM ASPIRATION TO HABIT

The most successful New Year's resolution is the one that becomes so embedded in daily routine that you stop thinking of it as a resolution at all. It is time for lifelong learning to consider the same principle.

Universities have spent years building infrastructure for lifelong learning, and opening doors and waiting for learners to walk through them. For truly lifelong education, it is time for universities to go to learners – to meet people where they actually are: in their compressed schedules, their fragmented days, their commutes to work, their queues for lunch.

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