



SPEECHES/INTERVIEWS

October 03, 2018

Opening Address by Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung, at the Singapore International Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Conference

1. Thank you for inviting me again to the conference this year. I hope everyone will have fruitful discussions and exchanges.

2. When I opened this conference three years ago, I spoke about the need for skills mastery, and how that was not just about education policy, but also society's culture and its respect for craftsmen and tradesmen. My speech was in line with the focus of this conference, which is TVET - technical and vocational education and training. Today, times have changed, my portfolio has changed to include all aspects of education, and so I will broaden the coverage of my speech.

FROM SKILLS TO KNOWLEDGE

3. Three years ago, Singapore had just launched a national movement called SkillsFuture, to advance the idea that in today's modern economy, we need to master skills through lifelong learning, and be really good at what we do, because if we don't, computers and robots will replace us.

4. We realised the need to develop an education system with multiple paths to success, to support and cater to the diverse strengths and talents of our people. It is not a traditional two-track system, with an academic path and a vocational path, but a multi-path system; that traditional divide between an academic path and vocational path has become artificial and obsolete, because what is cognitive and technical is not clear-cut.

5. This is because today, a person needs both knowledge and skills in order to do well. There are very few jobs which only involve thinking, because powerful machines will in time take all of these pure cognitive work. Even the best academics and researchers in universities do not just think, conceptualise and analyse. They do more than that. They have to possess the skills to conduct research, influence and persuade stakeholders, and deliver research impact.

6. Conversely, craftsmen we see today no longer just perform pure hands-on work. They internalise the science and know-how behind what they do. Hence, institutions such as ITE and SIT describe their educational approach with mottos like 'Thinking Hands', and 'Thinking Tinkerers'.

7. So, as the lines between cognition and skills blur, the term 'TVET' is not the best way to describe the work of the people in this room, and unfortunately, you may soon have to change the name of this conference.

SKILLSFUTURE AND ITS PROGRESS

8. The SkillsFuture movement is not just about promoting vocational or technical work. It is meant to send a powerful message to all Singaporeans in different occupations and industries, and across all learning ages, that in a

society and modern economy like Singapore, which has traditionally emphasised academic learning and qualifications, we now need to add mastery of skills into our repertoire of capabilities.

9. From the time SkillsFuture was launched in 2015, we have rolled out several programmes and initiatives. Today, let me provide a brief progress report.

10. In 2016, we created a statutory board called SkillsFuture Singapore under the Ministry of Education. With its creation, all education, learning and training matters come under one ministry. This is a demonstration of serious intent by the Government to promote lifelong learning, and this is a more effective structure to do so.

11. With this change, our public institutes of higher learning, namely ITE, polytechnics and universities, are progressively transforming themselves into lifelong learning institutes. Beyond educating young students, they also help adult learners upgrade their skills and knowledge to stay relevant and competitive.

12. Hence, in the lifelong learning industry today, we have three cylinders firing. They are the industries' in-house training, private training providers, and public institutes of higher learning. In 2015, the delivery of total training hours for adult learners was 26.5 million. In 2017, this has increased by 55% to 41 million, and it will continue to rise as the momentum of SkillsFuture gathers steam.

13. In tandem with this, the training participation rate for the resident labour force has increased from 35% in 2015 to 48% in 2017.

14. Training participation has been boosted by two important demand-side measures. First, the SkillsFuture Credit puts \$500 in the hands of every Singaporean above 25 years old, to help defray the cost of skills training and upgrading. Second, we created SkillsFuture Advice, which is a community outreach workshop to guide Singaporeans to better understand how to chart their skills development and career plans.

15. Today, out of 2.6 million Singaporeans who are eligible for SkillsFuture Credits, 370,000 have used it, for some 25,000 training courses. More than 31,000 adult learners have benefitted from SkillsFuture Advice. Most of the claims were for work-related training courses, the most popular of which were IT-related programmes, real estate sales, and vocational driving.

16. At the core of the SkillsFuture movement is passion. A strong personal desire to do something really well, a motivation powerful enough to drive someone to learn and hone a craft for life. This passion must be cultivated from young. That is why SkillsFuture is not just about training adult workers, but they must start from our formal school system.

17. Hence, we implemented education and career guidance in our primary and secondary schools. The younger students will have an awareness of their strengths, interests and talents, while the older students will understand their broad career paths or options, and make more informed choices for their further studies.

18. In our institutes of higher learning, education has become much more experiential, so that students pick up both knowledge and skills. In the Polytechnics, practically all students now go through industry internships, while in the Universities, about 70% of students do so.

19. More programmes have become apprenticeship-like or dual-study in nature – we learned a lot from Germany and Switzerland – such that students would split their time equally between study and work, which reinforce each other. These are being rolled out under ITE's Technical Diploma Programme, Earn and Learn Programme leading to Advanced or Specialist Diplomas, or the Work-Study Degree Programmes offered by our Universities. This is a mode of learning that will likely gain greater acceptance and popularity.

20. Apart from these programmes, if passion is at the core of lifelong learning, admission systems will need to evolve too. Our Polytechnics have adopted aptitude-based admissions in the most significant way. In 2016, we introduced the Early Admission Exercise (EAE), which happens before the main admission exercise in our Polytechnics, to admit students not just based on their academic grades in secondary school, but also their aptitudes, interest and talents in the chosen course of study.

21. For Admission Year 2019, the Polytechnics received a record number of EAE applicants at 13,900, 13% higher than last year. The more popular courses include Early Childhood, Nursing and Hospitality. The Polytechnics made 6,250 offers, 14% higher than last year - also a record high. The expected final enrolment through EAE should be about

4,600, which is close to 20% of the total admissions. This is an encouraging development in our efforts to match interest and talent to the course of study.

A SPIRIT TO LEARN FOR LIFE, FROM YOUNG

22. As a philosophy of learning, SkillsFuture needs to apply to all ages, including young learners in schools. It should inform the way we design curriculum, deliver teaching, and assess students.

23. Our education system needs to focus on fundamentals such as values, literacy and numeracy, offer variegated pathways that support the specific talents and interests of students, and enact lessons in a way that spur curiosity and wonder in our young, and make their eyes light up. It is therefore schools that lay the foundation for SkillsFuture and lifelong learning.

24. Successive Ministers for Education, senior officials and educators have been pushing the system in this direction for the past 10 to 20 years before SkillsFuture was launched.

25. They set up specialised schools like the Sports School, School of the Arts, and School of Science and Technology, which are secondary levels. Integrated Programmes were introduced to enable students with the aptitude for academics to go on a six-year programme combining secondary and pre-university studies.

26. In 1997, the 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' movement right-sized a heavy curriculum and introduced inquiry-based and applied learning into our classrooms. In 2010, we introduced the 21st Century Competencies, which are essential soft skills, into our curriculum. We have moved from teaching in fixed form classes, to flexible subject-banded classes. We introduced Values-in-Action to inculcate the spirit of giving to the community, and outdoor learning to better develop teamwork, collaboration and resilience.

27. To moderate excessive competition, we stopped the practice of ranking our schools, and the announcement of top-scorers in our Primary School Leaving Examination. In 2021, we will switch from scoring students based on a precise and norms-referenced T-score, to a banded and standards-referenced score. This will reduce excessive peer comparison, and chasing of the last mark by students.

28. Last week, we took another significant step, to have a phased reduction of examinations in primary and secondary schools by a quarter. Examinations have become such a comfortable security blanket that a large part of the education experience revolves around examinations. Teachers use lesson time to prepare students for examinations; conversations between parents and children are around tests and examinations; many students' free time is spent at tuition centres that drill them for examinations.

29. By default, we tend to assess how well a child is doing in school by his examination scores, but education is a holistic developmental experience that goes far beyond marks and grades. Between a child acing his examinations but hating the thought of going to school, versus another scoring average grades but delighted to attend school and learn – who is doing better? It is hard to say.

30. As a system and society, we have been over-reliant on this security blanket. Before it smothers us, we need to start to withdraw it somewhat, and focus on the true spirit of learning. When we made the announcements last week, I knew most students would cheer the move to reduce the number of examinations. But I was quite uncertain about the reaction of parents.

31. Fortunately, and to my great relief, there was no negative uproar, and I am deeply grateful to all the parents who wrote encouraging and supportive messages to me since I made the announcement. However, they have expressed valid worries and apprehension about the changes and I want to address two of the more important ones today.

32. The first is whether this is the start of the system starting to slacken and lose its rigour, and children would stop studying hard. I am very confident that this is not. We are reducing examinations by 25%, in a calibrated way, not removing them entirely. We are achieving a better balance between joy and rigour with this change.

33. So here is my advice to all our students: this change does not mean that there is less or no need to study. In fact, with the reduction in examinations, schools will have about three more weeks of curriculum time for every two school years. We will use this time to teach you better, so that you can learn better, because teachers don't have to rush through the curriculum in order to prepare for examinations. So take this opportunity to study well and enjoy school and learning more.

34. The second concern is the opposite of the first. While parents understand the need to dial back on the over-emphasis and reliance on examinations, they worry that schools or tuition centres will undo the change by re-introducing other assessments that are not called 'examinations', like common tests, mock exams, or prelims, to fill up the void we freed up.

35. We can worry less about the schools. This change is a concerted shift by the entire education system. Prior to the announcements, MOE spent three days discussing the matter with principals and vice principals, and they supported the move. They are in fact very glad that time has been returned to the schools, for better teaching and learning. MOE has given guidelines to the schools to limit the number of tests that will count towards year-end results.

36. As for tuition centres, there are a few I have read in the papers who have said that they will simulate examination-like conditions for students to make up for the lost examinations. I strongly urge them not to do so. Doing so would just be preying on the apprehension and anxieties of parents and students. Instead, try to understand why these changes are important to better prepare our young for the future, and help explain that to parents. Don't undo what we intend to do.

CONCLUSION

37. I have tried to connect the dots today, showing how the SkillsFuture movement spans across schools, higher education and the adult learning sector. It concerns curriculum, pedagogy, assessments, pathways, admission systems, guidance for students, and guidance for workers - every aspect of our system of education and learning.

38. Collectively, all the changes that have been taking place are transforming the way we prepare Singaporeans for the future. This is our Learn for Life system, guided by the philosophy of SkillsFuture, and promising a better future for Singaporeans.

39. Thank you.

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