

Urgent need to ensure disadvantaged students do not fall through the cracks

On The Ground



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To better prepare students for a fast-changing, increasingly complex world, Education Minister Lawrence Wong announced yesterday that his ministry will press on with four initiatives it has embarked on in recent years.

Speaking on the future of education at the inaugural webinar in a National University of Singapore series, he said the Ministry of Education (MOE) will step up efforts to maximise opportunities for disadvantaged students, build multiple pathways for students, help them develop attitudes and skills beyond book knowledge, and focus more on interdisciplinary learning.

As Mr Wong acknowledged, these are not new initiatives in education. They had been set in motion a few years ago because of fast-moving trends around the world.

But he pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated some of these trends and made it even more urgent to prepare for the changes.

No doubt, the most urgent of the four initiatives is the need to address inequality and ensure that education continues to enable children and youth from disadvantaged homes to level up to their peers and move ahead.

Inequality, especially in childhood, was brought into renewed focus during the circuit breaker period, when schools shut down and moved to home-based learning.

Schools made plans well in advance to ensure that children who lacked laptops and Internet connections did not fall behind in



As the pandemic has shown, children's well-being and success depend on more than just what happens in school. To help lift children from disadvantaged homes, we need to look holistically at the entirety of the children's lives. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

their learning. But soon, the "learning" part of the equation turned out to be the least of their problems.

Some of the children, instead, faced issues like their parents losing jobs. With the loss of income, some even reported instances of going hungry, and incidents of domestic violence. Those with parents in front-line jobs expressed worry and anxiety over the risks from the

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coronavirus.

Schools stepped in to help students – from giving meals and groceries to providing counselling and seeking community help for their students' parents.

No doubt in recent years, the ministry and schools have further stepped up their efforts to help children who are lagging behind their peers. MOE must be applauded for staffing schools with welfare officers and counsellors, and starting schemes to provide meals and after-school care.

But as the pandemic has shown – children's well-being and success depend on more than just what happens in school. To help lift children from disadvantaged homes, we need to look holistically at the entirety of the children's lives.

Mr Wong said the Government

will be increasing its investments in research and development in this area to guide these efforts.

"We want to invest more to even out the differences early in life, and give children full access to the appropriate health, learning and developmental support," he said.

Importantly, the help must be long-term, post-pandemic, if it is to lift the lives of these children.

He also announced that Second Minister for Education Maliki Osman will be leading a review to see what more his ministry can do to ensure that graduates from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and the five polytechnics are prepared for the working world.

As he stressed, it will be important to ensure that the graduates "acquire deep skills and competencies that are well matched to their interests, and

also the needs of employers and the industry".

A significant proportion of students in these institutions, especially ITE, come from poorer homes.

In a recession, the job prospects of ITE graduates are likely to take a hit.

Hence, the review and the schemes that follow must also look at how to help ITE and polytechnic students fare better in a recession.

The inequities in children's lives are not new; educators and social organisations that focus their efforts on children know that these problems have existed forever.

What has happened now is that the pandemic has laid bare these hard realities to the public. The hope is that this awareness of inequities will create a new sense of urgency to address them.

Review to ensure ITE, poly grads are equipped for jobs

Move to make sure graduates have deep skills and competencies suited to jobs will be led by Maliki

Jolene Ang

Second Minister for Education Maliki Osman will be leading a review to see what more his ministry can do to ensure that graduates from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and the five polytechnics are prepared for the working world.

Announcing the review yesterday, Education Minister Lawrence Wong said it will be important to ensure that the graduates "acquire deep skills and competencies that are well matched to their interests, and also the needs of employers and the industry".

More information on the review will be shared later.

Mr Wong said that diverse pathways for students is a major strength that Singapore must continue to uphold.

"Around the world, too many countries have shifted to an overly academic model of tertiary or university education," he said.

"I think in Singapore, we have been fortunate to avoid some of these imbalances, because we have paid a lot of attention over the years to our technical and vocational training. That is why we have always said that ITE is the jewel in our education system."

The "gold standard" for technical and vocational training is Germany, he noted.

It has a dual-track system where students will complete a three-year apprenticeship with a company – spending about half their time learning on the job, and the other half in a vocational training school.

Such a system, undertaken by about half of the cohort in Germany, is regarded very highly by society, he said.

Singapore, too, has started work-study programmes in the institutes of higher learning, especially



Education Minister Lawrence Wong speaking at the first session of the NUS115 Distinguished Speaker Series. Beside him is Professor Susanna Leong, NUS vice-provost for master's programmes and lifelong education, who was the moderator. Mr Wong said diverse pathways for students is a major strength that Singapore must continue to uphold. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

ITE and polytechnics.

ITE now offers 24 work-study diploma programmes, which are apprenticeship-based programmes with 70 per cent of the course delivered through structured, on-the-job training.

Mr Wong said: "They are an important applied pathway for students to learn, acquire deep skills and relevant work experience."

"We are starting from a strong position but there is still more that can be done in this space."

Mr Wong was speaking at the first session of the NUS115 Distinguished Speaker Series, organised by the National University of Singapore (NUS).

It was held at the Shaw Foundation Alumni House with limited participants, and streamed virtually to a wider audience.

The series will run until the middle or third quarter of next year, depending on the Covid-19 situation.

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AVOIDING IMBALANCES

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EDUCATION MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG



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From production technician to digital hardware engineer

Mr Eric Liu started his career as a production technician, but soon found his work too routine and began thinking about upgrading his skills.

He decided to enrol in a part-time diploma programme in electronic engineering at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, and later a part-time degree programme at the National University of Singapore.

Mr Liu, who is in his late 30s, graduated from NUS last year with highest honours and a degree in electronic engineering.

He was cited by Education Minister Lawrence Wong in his speech yesterday. Describing Mr Liu as an inspiration to all Singaporeans, Mr Wong said: "With his new skills, he continued to progress in his career, and he started a new job last week as a digital hardware engineer in ST Engineering."

Graduates from institutes of higher learning (IHLs) will have to embrace workplace learning, the minister said. Individuals can attend training by their companies or programmes offered by third parties and IHLs, leading to qualifications such as a specialist diploma.

Mr Wong said the IHLs must support individuals' pursuit of active learning throughout their careers, and also build relationships with their graduates.

"It is not just about getting them to donate as alumni, but it is about supporting your students after they enter the workforce – continuously engaging your alumni to update themselves on latest trends in industry, to help them grow their professional networks, and encouraging them to proactively upskill and reskill."

He noted that the universities have been focusing on building up their continuing education and training (CET) departments and offering more modules. "This is truly a growth area because we have to build this up."

The Government has found that no country has a good model for adult education and training in place today, and Singapore will have to come up with a model of its own, Mr Wong added.

This will be a whole-of-government effort. For one thing, the country will be investing more in SkillsFuture and lifelong learning.

"But we will have to think through how the funds are allocated, on the supply and demand sides, and how we shape individual and firm-level incentives to achieve the best outcomes," he said.

"In many ways, we are already at the forefront of policy thinking in this area, and we will have to continue to innovate and experiment with new programmes and ideas."

Jolene Ang

No country has a good model for adult education and training in place today, and Singapore will have to come up with a model of its own, said Mr Wong.