

Focus on 5 key areas to keep education system relevant: Chan

Urgency to evolve quickly is clear and more must be done, says Education Minister

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Boosting lifelong learning and closing learning gaps early in life are among the five key areas of focus needed to ensure Singapore's education system stays relevant in an increasingly uncertain and challenging world.

The urgency for Singapore's education system to evolve quickly is clear and more must be done, said Education Minister Chan Chun Sing on Thursday.

He was speaking at the first session of Singapore Perspectives 2023, a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on the theme of work.

1 CUSTOMISING LEARNING AND CLOSING LEARNING GAP EARLY

Stronger investments will be needed in the early years, especially for less privileged children, said Mr Chan.

He said this is important as there is increasing evidence that the learning and development gap must not be allowed to widen from a young age. "Once the development gap sets in, the amount of remediation required is inordinately high and it becomes difficult to rectify," said the minister.

"We will examine afresh new ways to reach out to these children and families, structure the support for them holistically... so that no one is left behind at the start."

Mr Chan welcomed partnerships

to pilot new models to meet differing needs.

Technologies in artificial intelligence and deep analytics must also enable the system to better customise learning approaches for every child, he said. Students must continue to have diversity in pathways and subject choices.

With that, aptitude-based admissions that take students' potential and interest into account will become a greater part of Singapore's selection and placement system, Mr Chan added.

2 MOVING BEYOND THE FIRST 15 YEARS TO THE NEXT 50 YEARS

Individuals must look to new benchmarks of success, such as having a spirit of inquiry and a desire to create new knowledge and value, said Mr Chan.

Companies cannot and must not passively wait for the "perfect worker" to be developed for them,

he said. They must be active partners in shaping students' interests and skill sets early, and must work with academia to train workers, even after they join the workforce, he added.

Institutions also need to redesign teaching methods to meet the needs of adult learners, he said.

3 CLOSER LINKS BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND INDUSTRY

From creating new value at the intersection of conventional disciplines to better translating research into enterprises, tighter industry-academia tie-ups at all levels are needed, said Mr Chan.

"When industry and academia co-design, co-develop and co-deliver the pre-employment and continuing education modules for both students and adult learners, we refresh the skills of our people much faster," he said.

He added that work-study de-

grees and diplomas will become more common.

4 GETTING WHOLE OF SOCIETY INVOLVED

Mr Chan said: "To truly enhance the diversity of strengths and broaden our definition of success, we must work with parents, community partners and industries."

"We must also work with our industry to close the skills gap and remunerate according to contributions rather than just credentials. If we do not collectively narrow the remuneration gap between graduates and non-graduates, diploma holders and non-diploma holders, no amount of preaching the multiple pathways of success will ever work."

5 INVESTING IN TEACHING FRATERNITY

Educators, too, need to keep their

skills updated, said Mr Chan.

"Beyond transmitting knowledge, they are facilitators of discovery and learning. Beyond academics, they provide emotional support for our children and families with higher needs," he said.

"Beyond engaging mainstream students, they have to reach out and nurture students with special educational needs."

"Beyond mastering tried-and-tested pedagogies, they now have to explore and develop new pedagogies and andragogies (adult learning) to deliver blended learning."

Even educators at institutes of higher learning must continue to learn, and the Institute for Adult Learning will be the third pillar of professional development – in addition to the National Institute of Education and National Institute of Early Childhood Development.

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Call to ensure workers retain dignity, identity as jobs transform

**Ng Wei Kai and
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The increasing focus on sustainability will affect blue- and white-collar workers in every industry and require them to learn new skills.

As jobs transform, it is important to find a way to make sure they still give employees dignity and a sense of identity, said Ms Winnie Tan, senior vice-president of sustainability at insurance firm Great Eastern.

She was speaking on Thursday at a panel discussion that took place during the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference.

This year, the focus is on work and the panel discussion was titled *Transiting To The Digital, Green And Care Economies: How To Succeed In The Jobs Ahead*.

"We need to think about the purpose and dignity of work, not just for white-collar executives, but also for production line workers... When jobs start to look different, how might we help shape (the jobs) so they can perform," said Ms Tan.

The online panel discussion was moderated by Dr Carol Soon, IPS senior research fellow and head of its society and culture department.

The other panellists were Dr Ng Wai Chong, founder and chief executive officer of aged-care consultancy NWC Longevity Practice, and Dr Ong Chen Hui, assistant CEO of the BizTech Group at the Infocomm Media Development Authority.

Giving the example of how the European Union is banning the

sale of new cars that run on petrol or diesel from 2035, Ms Tan said shifts towards sustainability like this will need workers to quickly pick up new skills, making retraining essential.

She said: "You could be standing in a production line or be a sales or finance executive in the automobile industry... You need to start factoring things like carbon taxes into your financial reporting... how might you acquire these skills?"

Ms Tan said one way forward may be to understand "adjacency of skills", or how the new skills a worker needs relate to the ones he already has. Workers must also be supported by policies that enable learning and give enough resources to members of the public to allow them to learn new skills.

She said: "It is about creating an equal playing field."

Dr Ng and Dr Ong spoke about how caretaking jobs, such as nurses and maids for the elderly, and traditional roles like bank tellers were transforming, and how workers can keep up with the changes.

The three panellists also took questions from an online audience of about 580.

Dr Ong said that while various training programmes and schemes are available, it is still up to the individual to take charge and plan his own way forward.

A separate panel discussion, moderated by IPS senior research fellow Faizal Yahya, featured topics including how workers might feel the pressure to upskill and the need for them to acquire soft skills alongside technical skills.

Dr Gog Soon Joo, chief skills officer at SkillsFuture Singapore, acknowledged that changes and the "never-ending learning" required

can be overwhelming for workers.

She suggested that individuals take small steps by exploring short modular courses before moving on to fuller programmes.

"Not all skills and not all jobs will expire very quickly," she said, adding that soft skills are enduring. Soft skills include thinking, communication and problem-solving skills.

Agreeing, Mr Indranil Roy, executive director of consulting firm Deloitte Consulting South-east Asia, said the ability to solve problems is critical in helping workers to be open to learning and adapting.

When employees attempt to solve a problem, it forces them to learn new skills and gain better perspectives, he said. This also forces them to pick up skills that are important in the modern world, he added.

During the session, Ms Low Khah Gek, chief executive of the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), made a pitch for employers to go beyond degree requirements and assess the skills of candidates when recruiting.

ITE graduates have high potential for technology-related jobs but are often excluded from jobs that require degree qualifications, she said.

Some companies in the infocommunication technology sector make use of performance tasks to assess candidates instead of relying solely on paper qualifications, she added.

"To their surprise... among (the shortlisted), there is a mix of different qualifications," she said.

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