

Singapore's lifelong learning scene is ripe for transformation

Bold strategies can be taken to better engage workers and employers across the board and it goes beyond funding.



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Next year, the SkillsFuture movement will be 10 years old. Over the past decade, continuing education and training (CET) has become a national priority driven by advancing technology and intensifying global competition.

While the CET ecosystem has matured, challenges remain: how to get more workers and employers to invest in training, and how to get the most bang for the buck from public spending on CET.

Addressing these challenges will take tighter coordination across stakeholders in the CET ecosystem.

At The Conversation, an event hosted by the National University of Singapore, I listened to thought leaders from the institutes of higher learning (IHLs), National Trades Union Congress, public agencies and the private sector who had come together to make sense of the CET landscape and consider what could be done collectively to strengthen it.

The Conversation raised several interesting ideas to improve the

effectiveness and efficiency of CET in Singapore. One thing was clear: a greater level of engagement and innovation could take CET forward.

FOR WORKERS: CUSTOMISATION, FLEXIBILITY AND FUN

Among those who are reluctant to take up training, some perceive it as neither engaging nor relevant; others may have struggled in school and dread a return to the classroom.

We often forget that learning should be enjoyable for everyone, not just children. For adults juggling work, caregiving and other family responsibilities, attending training sessions can feel like an added burden, making it seem more tempting to spend that time catching up on much-needed rest. Even those who are motivated to learn may be hindered as a result.

The solution for this goes beyond funding – giving employees time away from work may also not suffice as trainees have to deal with a backlog of e-mails when they return to office. Flexible learning options such as digital, online and workplace learning could help.

Training could also be made more attractive and accessible by personalising it to individual needs and preferences. For instance, there could be options for experiential learning through workshops and projects that integrate learning with work.

Organisations can also foster a learning culture where setting aside time for training is a norm. For instance, besides an “Eat with your family” day, there could be a “Learn with your family” day.

Those who find motivation by learning alongside family members and friends could be encouraged to do so through course discounts for group bookings, similar to how group discounts motivate friends to sign up for fitness events together. With the right trainers and technology, it is possible for people to learn together while progressing at their own pace.

Learning should also build on existing skills and experience. This could entail recognising prior learning through work experience, so that workers are only required to top up their skills in specific areas rather than be forced to relearn what they already know well.

FOR EMPLOYERS: CLIENT-CENTRIC AND RELEVANT TRAINING

User experience plays a big part in getting employers to embrace training. Training design and delivery should therefore be client-centric.

An organisation looking to develop new competencies might benefit from a comprehensive package that includes training for all employees, from new hires to C-suite executives, as well as targeted recruitment of skilled candidates. This could be achieved through a consortium of various IHLs, private training providers and employment agencies.

Training should also dovetail with a firm's business needs and transformation plans, focusing on improving collective staff performance such as by facilitating the adoption of new technology or work processes throughout the organisation.

Piecemeal training, on the other hand, may boost individual workers' productivity without optimising team performance.

A tiered approach could be adopted to help firms identify suitable training programmes. While larger firms can customise training for their needs, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that lack scale could benefit from a system aggregator that pools training needs and matches them with suitable providers.

SMEs should also be given access to a well-designed self-service platform that facilitates course search, similar to hotel booking websites.

Course ratings on this platform should reflect input from employers and not just trainees. These could be corroborated by third-party skills assessors to give employers a better sense of course quality and training effectiveness.

FOR TRAINING PROVIDERS: COLLABORATION

While some competition among CET providers can spur improvement and innovation, excessive competition could lead to inefficient outcomes, such as duplication of effort and resources, or heavy spending on course marketing by training providers competing for the same niche.

There is in fact much to be gained from coordination and collaboration. For instance, training providers could pool data on skills, training needs and learning outcomes. Modular courses offered by different CET providers could be stacked into common qualifications to give trainees more options.

It is important to play to the strengths of different CET providers rather than adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

IHLs can complement one another in delivering seamless CET offerings for organisations and individuals. This could be encouraged at the system level by defining suitable outcomes and differentiated KPIs, and designing funding incentives to encourage collaboration.

ASSESSING SYSTEM-LEVEL EFFICACY

The return on investment in

training, whether privately or publicly funded, is often assessed in terms of productivity gains for employers along with wage growth for workers.

However, training is more than just achieving better performance and pay now. It is also about investing in the future by strengthening career health and workforce resilience. Just as we should take care of our health before we fall sick, workers should not wait till they have lost their jobs before embarking on training.

Employers too should train workers for the skills and jobs of tomorrow, as reskilling workers cannot be done overnight and it is often more costly to replace workers than to retain them.

It is also important to recognise that an employer may not capture all the benefits from worker training; there are also spillover benefits to the wider industry or economy from a more skilled and competitive workforce.

Such spillover benefits have to be factored into any assessment of the overall return on CET, particularly public investment in CET. We need to develop ways to assess the impact of training on career health and workforce competitiveness. This is no easy task, but it would be well worth the effort.

SINGAPORE CAN LEAD THE WAY

Globally, CET is in an emergent phase as no country has perfected its system.

With generous government funding for SkillsFuture, Singapore has an opportunity to show the way in developing a world-class, future-ready CET ecosystem.

The benefits from The Conversation go beyond the concrete suggestions that emerged – by forging networks and renewing connections, it will hopefully kickstart a sustained dialogue among stakeholders to take Singapore's CET ecosystem to the next level.

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