

Lifelong Learning and the SkillsFuture Movement in Singapore

At the 10th anniversary of the SkillsFuture movement in 2025, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong described it as “a key pillar of our refreshed social compact in Singapore” and “a major effort to transform our economy and our society”.¹ This reflects the centrality of SkillsFuture within Singapore’s economic and social policy framework, in particular, its role in supporting a competitive economy and enabling Singaporeans to earn a good living.

While the launch of SkillsFuture marked a new phase of investment in lifelong learning, the government has long invested in adult education and training to build a skilled workforce. Since the country’s independence, Singapore’s system of Continuing Education and Training (CET) has been progressively built up with the launch of new institutions, frameworks and programmes, along with funding support.

This case study outlines milestones in the development of the CET ecosystem that laid the foundation for the SkillsFuture movement, examines the motivation for SkillsFuture, and reviews key SkillsFuture initiatives. This sets the stage for an assessment of how successful the movement has been in meeting its aims, and to consider what more must be done to address the skills and workforce challenges that lie ahead.

Foundations: Investment in Skills Development and CET Infrastructure

Early Skills Development Efforts

It is often said that people are Singapore’s only resource. This has made human capital investment integral to Singapore’s economic development. Since the beginning of Singapore’s industrialisation drive in the 1960s, the government has prioritised investment in education and workforce skills development as a core economic and social strategy.

A skilled workforce was necessary to attract foreign direct investment to Singapore, which would give the country access to markets, technology and know-how that the fledgling city-state lacked. Singapore scored early successes in attracting US electronics firms such as General Electric and Texas Instruments, which were looking for a low-cost overseas production base to compete with rival manufacturers.² Multinational corporations from Europe and Japan also set up operations in Singapore, growing an electronics manufacturing cluster here.

¹ Lawrence Wong, speech at the 10th Anniversary of SkillsFuture, May 23, 2025, Prime Minister’s Office, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lawrence-Wong-at-the-SkillsFuture-10th-Anniversary>.

² Economic Development Board, “Made in Singapore: 60 Years of Manufacturing,” August 11, 2025, <https://www.edb.gov.sg/en/business-insights/insights/made-in-singapore-60-years-of-manufacturing.html>.

This case study was written by Associate Professor Terence Ho, Institute for Adult Learning, and has been funded by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The case study does not reflect the views of the sponsoring organisation nor is it intended to suggest correct or incorrect handling of the situation depicted. The case study is not intended to serve as a primary source of data and is meant solely for class discussion.

The Economic Development Board (EDB), which was formed in 1961 to attract investment into Singapore, set up training centres in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme and foreign governments, as well as multinationals, viz. Tata, Rollei and Philips. Former EDB Chairman Chan Chin Bock explained:

*We would provide the land and pay for the building of a school for training; the training centre. And the company would supply trainers and the software for training and all that. So, the training school became a joint venture between EDB and companies which had been identified as leaders of that type of industrial training at that time.*³

Concurrently, the government ramped up technical and vocational education by establishing training institutes and introducing a technical education stream in secondary schools.

Skills Development Fund

In 1979, an Act was passed requiring employers to make monthly contributions to a new Skills Development Fund (SDF) via a Skills Development Levy. The SDF financed the training of employees and retrenched workers, and also supported firms that wished to update their business operations and technology. Employers, having contributed to the fund, were encouraged to make use of it by sending their workers for training and upskilling.

Among the programmes funded by the SDF were the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST), Modular Skills Training (MOST), Worker Improvement through Secondary Education (WISE), Core Skills for Effectiveness and Change, and Critical Enabling Skills Training. These programmes equipped workers with essential literacy skills for productivity and employability, given that a significant share of the workforce at the time had only primary or lower-secondary education.⁴

The SDF, now administered by the SkillsFuture Singapore agency, remains a significant source of funding for reskilling today.

Skills Redevelopment Programme

The Skills Redevelopment Programme (SRP) was launched in 1996 as a tripartite initiative spearheaded by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)⁵ to upgrade workers' skills, enhance their employability and support workforce transformation amid economic uncertainty.⁶ Beginning as a \$10 million pilot for 1,500 rank-and-file

³ Chin Bock Chan, "Chan Chin Bock: Chairman of the Economic Development Board," in *Speaking Truth to Power: Singapore's Pioneer Public Servants*, ed. Hoe Yeong Loke (Singapore: World Scientific, 2019), 161, https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/epdf/10.1142/9789811211522_0007.

⁴ Terence Ho and Silin Yang, *Tripartism in Action – Workforce Skills Development in Singapore since 1965* (Singapore: Tripartite Collective, 2025), 11, <https://www.tal.sg/-/media/tal/corporate/files/2025/tripartism-in-workforce-skills-development.ash>.

⁵ The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) is the umbrella organisation encompassing most trade unions in Singapore.

⁶ Kay del Rosario, "The Man Who Built Ladders: Lim Swee Say on Why PWM Beats Minimum Wage," National Trades Union Congress, July 4, 2025, <https://www.ntuc.org.sg/uportal/news/The-man-who-built-ladders-Lim-Swee-Say-on-why-PWM-beats-minimum-wage/>.

workers from 10 companies, the SRP proved useful during the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, prompting the government to pledge a further \$100 million to the programme.⁷ Notably, SRP provided not just training subsidies, but also compensated companies, via an absentee payroll, for lost working hours due to training. This remains a feature of SkillsFuture support today.

National Skills Recognition System

Besides funding, Singapore's CET system also required a national framework for recognising job skills. The National Skills Recognition System (NSRS) was established to develop definitive workplace skills standards and certify training that met these standards. This would also facilitate the development of certifiable, "bite-sized" modular learning that could be offered part-time to working adults with time constraints.⁸ The NSRS was first piloted in the cleaning, hotel and marine industries in 1999, and later expanded to other sectors.

Establishment of Workforce Development Agency and Workforce Skills Qualification

The early 2000s was a period of slow economic growth and heightened unemployment, arising from a global electronics slowdown following the collapse of the dot.com bubble in 2001. Amid significant job losses, there was a need to support workforce resilience through more systematic CET efforts.⁹ Following the recommendations of the Economic Review Committee, the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) was formed in September 2003 to spearhead CET policy and implementation.¹⁰

In 2005, WDA launched the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) system, which superseded the NSRS. WSQ provides modular, competency-based certification pathways across the economy, focusing on skills application and employability.¹¹ In addition to recognising and certifying workers' existing skills, it provides for skills upgrading and mobility along structured career pathways. Today, WSQ serves as the national skills-based credentialing system enabling skills recognition by employers and workers, as well as the development of workforce skills and competencies to support industry growth and transformation.

Training Providers and Quality Assurance

The SkillsFuture Singapore agency (SSG) has appointed CET Centres to deliver quality adult training. These are training providers that offer various WSQ courses and training, and may also offer additional services such as

⁷ Ong Teng Cheong Labour Leadership Institute (OTCi), *Milestones of NTUC and Worker Upgrading and Employability*, (Singapore: OTCi, 2022). See also NTUC LearningHub Facebook post dated June 18, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/ntuclearninghub/posts/in-1998-then-prime-minister-goh-chok-tong-pledged-100-million-to-expand-the-skil/2410484582349382/>.

⁸ Boon Yang Lee, speech at the launch of the National Skills Recognition System, September 5, 2000, National Archives of Singapore, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/2000090503.htm>.

⁹ Sue-Ann Chia and Rachel Lee, "Agency Acts to Get Jobless Back to Work," *The Straits Times*, September 13, 2003, 1, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes20030913-1.2.2>.

¹⁰ Singapore Economic Review Committee, *New Challenges, Fresh Goals – Towards a Dynamic Global City* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, February 2003), 15, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/docs/9e938788-da9c-11e6-bb26-0050568939ad/Misc.3of2003.pdf?

¹¹ SkillsFuture Singapore, *Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications*, last updated June 4, 2025, <https://www.ssg.gov.sg/skills-development/workforce-skills-qualifications#342dc668f6446d18ddb48d9c7206ef1c>.

employment advisory and placement. They include Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs),¹² industry associations as well as private training providers. CET Centres are required to undergo accreditation and the Continuous Improvement Review process to ensure high standards and training quality. SSG also monitors their trainees' training and placement activities.

To ensure the quality of government-funded CET programmes, adult educators must be trained and certified by the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) to be eligible to conduct SkillsFuture-supported training. IAL was established under WDA in 2008 to provide training for adult educators, and subsequently became an autonomous institute of the Singapore University of Social Sciences in 2019.

Collectively, these initiatives strengthened Singapore's continuing education and lifelong learning system, laying the foundations for the SkillsFuture movement.

Motivation for SkillsFuture

By the early 2010s, Singapore had made substantial progress in strengthening its education and skills ecosystem. In particular, Singapore's school system had gained international recognition for its rigour and quality, with Singapore 15-year-olds outperforming their peers in international tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, and the Programme in International Student Assessment.¹³ Singapore's considerable investment in pre-employment training (PET) – in teaching quality, programmes and infrastructure – was clearly reaping dividends.

Nonetheless, there was growing recognition among policymakers that with longevity increasing and technological change transforming jobs, lifelong learning and reskilling would take on even greater significance in the years ahead, and this would require a significant step up in CET investment.

Rebalancing between PET and CET

Whereas in the past more workers stayed with one employer over the course of their careers, job and career changes were becoming more common. Furthermore, Singaporeans were living longer and retiring later. This meant that what young Singaporeans learnt in formal education before joining the workforce would not likely be sufficient to carry them through to the end of their working years. Even within the same job or occupation, technology was transforming job roles and tasks. Therefore, there was a need to rebalance between the state's investment in PET and CET.

IHLs were encouraged to offer more CET courses to adult learners in the workforce, becoming "institutes of lifelong learning". CET academies were formed in the IHLs, with more enlisted to teach CET courses in addition

¹² Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) include local autonomous universities, polytechnics and the Institute of Technical Education.

¹³ Sandra Davie, "Singapore Students Shine in PISA 2012 Test," *The Straits Times*, December 4, 2013; Amelia Teng, "Singapore Students Top Global Achievement Test in Mathematics and Science," *The Straits Times*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/singapore-students-top-global-achievement-test-in-mathematics-and-science>.

to PET. A key target was IHL graduates, who were encouraged to return to their alma maters for regular skills top-ups over the course of their careers.

Addressing the “Paper Chase”

A significant workforce challenge had arisen from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and polytechnic graduates aspiring to upgrade to a degree immediately rather than joining the workforce upon graduation. Many of these ITE and polytechnic graduates chose to pursue degrees in non-technical areas such as business and management, often through distance learning programmes.

This meant that employers had reduced access to the pool of technically trained workers that the government had invested in training. The government was also concerned about potential underemployment among the enlarged pool of degree holders, which could lead to unhappiness if they were unable to land jobs that met their expectations.

To address this challenge, the Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review (ASPIRE) Committee, chaired by then-Senior Minister of State (Education) Indraneel Rajah, recommended launching new programmes integrating work and study, drawing inspiration from apprenticeship models in Switzerland and Germany.¹⁴ Under the proposed place-and-train model, companies would employ polytechnic and ITE graduates and pay them, while providing on-the-job training in addition to classes at the polytechnics or ITE. This was the genesis of the Work-Study Programmes (initially called Earn and Learn programmes) subsequently launched under SkillsFuture. The recommendations of the committee, released in 2014, were accepted by the Government and played a key part in shaping the SkillsFuture movement.

Launch of SkillsFuture and Key Objectives

The SkillsFuture movement was described by then-Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam as a “major new phase of investment in our people, throughout life.”¹⁵ This would build on existing CET efforts and infrastructure but raise the level of investment and ambition. The name of the movement, a portmanteau of “skills” and “future” was chosen to reflect the criticality of skills and lifelong learning for Singapore’s future. The focus, as then-DPM Tharman articulated in the 2015 Budget Statement, was on “skills and mastery” needed to take Singapore’s economy to the next level, while empowering Singaporeans to take charge of their learning journeys and gain fulfilment through learning across life stages.

A suite of new initiatives was rolled out in 2015 (see section on SkillsFuture Initiatives). The Ministry of Finance estimated that, with the implementation of the full SkillsFuture package, public spending on CET spending would increase from about \$600 million per year over the previous five years, to an average of over \$1 billion per year from 2015 to 2020.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ming En Siau, “Proposals to Improve Prospects for Poly and ITE Graduates Announced,” *TODAY*, August 25, 2014, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/aspire-recommendations-improve-polytechnic-ite-graduates>.

¹⁵ Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Budget Statement, 2015, <https://www.mof.gov.sg/budget-archives/budget-2015/>.

¹⁶ Shanmugaratnam, Budget Statement, 2015.

A tripartite SkillsFuture Council, chaired by then-DPM Tharman, was formed to coordinate stakeholders and drive the movement.¹⁷ It aimed to:

1. Help individuals make well-informed choices in education, training and careers.
2. Develop an integrated, high-quality system of education and training that responds to constantly evolving industry needs.
3. Promote employer recognition and career development based on skills and mastery.
4. Foster a culture that supports and celebrates lifelong learning.

SkillsFuture Singapore Agency

To provide sharper institutional focus for the SkillsFuture Movement, WDA was reconstituted into two separate statutory boards:

- SSG, under the Ministry of Education (MOE), was tasked with driving the SkillsFuture movement.
- Workforce Singapore (WSG), under the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), was responsible for labour market activation and employment facilitation.

The placement of SSG under MOE underscored that CET was part of a continuum of lifelong learning alongside PET. Furthermore, MOE had the necessary levers to orient IHLs towards ramping up CET offerings. Notwithstanding, SSG continues to work closely with WSG as part of an employment and employability ecosystem.

Training Support and Guidance

SkillsFuture Training Grants

Under SkillsFuture, course fee funding is available for both employer-sponsored and self-sponsored trainees (see Table 1).

Table 1: SkillsFuture Course Fee Funding

Courses offered by SSG-appointed CET Centres	Funding Rate
Citizens and Permanent Residents (PRs)	Up to 70% of course fees
Citizens aged 40 and above	Up to 90%*
Citizens and PRs with disabilities	Up to 95% for eligible courses supported by SG Enable
Other Certifiable Courses	Funding Rate
Citizens and PRs	Up to 50%
Citizens aged 40 and above	Up to 70%*

Source: SSG website (rates as of 12 September 2022; last updated 15 September 2025).

* Higher funding rates for mature workers under the SkillsFuture Mid-Career Enhanced Subsidy introduced in 2015.

¹⁷ "SkillsFuture," Ministry of Manpower, accessed November 12, 2025, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/skills-training-and-development/skillsfuture>.

In addition, employers can claim for absentee payroll for their employees at up to \$4.50 per hour of training attended, capped at \$100,000 per company per year.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are eligible for Enhanced Training Support for SMEs which provides up to 90% course fee funding for SME employees (citizens, PRs and long-term visit pass plus or LTVP+ holders) attending training conducted by SSG-appointed CET Centres and IHLs, and up to 70% funding for other certifiable courses conducted by external training providers. Until 2024, there was also SkillsFuture funding for certifiable in-house training (\$7 per hour; \$15 per hour for SMEs) and non-certifiable training (\$2 per hour).

Announced in 2025, the SkillsFuture Workforce Development Grant will bring together existing Government workforce transformation schemes under SSG and WSG, for example, WSG's Career Conversion Programmes, SSG's NACE Workplace Learning Projects (see section on Workplace Learning), to provide holistic support to enterprises for workforce transformation. The grant is part of the new Enterprise Workforce Transformation Package.

SkillsFuture Advice and SkillsFuture Mentors

SkillsFuture Advice is a 45-to-60-minute workshop session where SSG shares with participants emerging workforce trends, SkillsFuture programmes and resources for career planning and upgrading needs. Registration is free and participants can choose between online and physical sessions.

In 2015, SPRING Singapore¹⁸ launched the SkillsFuture SME Mentors Programme.¹⁹ The aim was to build a pool of mentors with rich industry experience to help SMEs foster a better learning environment, supporting their participation in SkillsFuture initiatives such as the Earn and Learn Programme. The government provided full funding for the mentors, with an initial budget of \$45 million.

Mentors underwent an orientation programme conducted by Republic Polytechnic before being deployed to SMEs for a nine-month period, during which they studied the enterprise's learning and development systems, and made recommendations for improvement. They also assisted with the review and enhancement of SMEs' internship or on-the-job training plans, and helped guide company supervisors and managers in training delivery.

Skills Frameworks

Skills Frameworks, introduced in 2016, are developed for the Singapore workforce by the government in partnership with employers, industry associations, unions and professional bodies.²⁰ The frameworks

¹⁸ SPRING (Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board) Singapore was a statutory board established to help Singapore enterprises grow and to build trust in Singapore products and services. It merged with International Enterprise Singapore in 2018 to form Enterprise Singapore.

¹⁹ S. Iswaran, speech at the launch of the SkillsFuture Mentors Programme, December 4, 2015, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/newsroom/mr-s-iswaran-at-the-launch-of-skillsfuture-mentors-programme-at-republic-polytechnic/>.

²⁰ Ministry of Education, *Progress of Adoption of Skills Frameworks*, reply to Parliamentary Question, July 5, 2021, <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/parliamentary-replies/20210705-progress-of-adoption-of-skills-frameworks>.

articulate job roles, career pathways and skills requirements across more than 30 sectors, to facilitate skills identification, inform training, enhance business performance, and support employability. Going forward, SSG plans to keep the Skills Frameworks continually updated through a skills discovery process by tapping on dynamic labour market intelligence and expert validation.²¹

MySkillsFuture Portal

Besides funding for reskilling, people also need access to timely information and guidance when planning their training and career development. MySkillsFuture.gov.sg was launched in 2017 as a one-stop portal for learning and skills development, merging an education and career guidance portal previously catering to students from Primary Five and above, and an Individual Learning portal piloted for workers in 2014. The portal allows users to search for suitable training courses, monitor SkillsFuture Credit utilisation, sign up for programmes such as SkillsFuture Advice, and access industry insights and other online services such as self-assessment tools to discover career interests, skills confidence and work values.

Job-Skills Portal

Besides the MySkillsFuture portal, a new Jobs-Skills Portal was launched by SSG in 2025. The portal features the Skills Frameworks, as well as jobs-skills tools, insights, and resources for training providers and individuals. It also hosts the following interactive dashboards:

- Job Requirements Dashboard, to provide employers and employees with jobs-skills insights specific to job roles, and support workplace training and personal upskilling.
- Priority Skills Dashboard, to help training providers anticipate market needs and plan their training courses.
- Skills and Job Mobility Dashboard, to support individuals exploring career transition opportunities.

Career and Skills Passport

While the MySkillsFuture portal had already featured a skills passport previously, SSG launched a revamped Career and Skills Passport in November 2024 in collaboration with MOM, MOE and WSG. The passport consolidates an individual's career and skills records from government-verified sources. Users can choose which records they wish to share with partnering online job portals, and can also share their profile directly with potential employers.

The passport contains (a) verified employment data from Central Provident Fund²² records and MOM, (b) verified educational records from MOE and IHLs, (c) verified skills from the user's certifications and employer validation, as well as skills added by the user, and (d) professional training records including WSQ certifications, other SSG-funded courses and certifications added by the user.

²¹ "Frameworks," Jobs and Skills Portal, accessed November 13, 2025, <https://jobsandskills.skillsfuture.gov.sg/frameworks/skills-frameworks>.

²² The Central Provident Fund is a mandatory savings scheme for Singapore citizens and permanent residents who are employed in Singapore.

SkillsFuture Initiatives

In addition to existing training grants, new initiatives were launched under the SkillsFuture umbrella in Budget 2015. Subsequently, other programmes were introduced to provide further support to enterprises and workers, particularly mid-career workers.

SkillsFuture Credit

Among the signature initiatives introduced in Budget 2015 was SkillsFuture Credit, which aims to strengthen individual agency in skills development. Each Singaporean aged 25 and above was given an initial \$500 credit that could be used to offset out-of-pocket costs in a wide range of training programmes. This placed training decisions in the hands of citizens, independent of their employers. The SkillsFuture Credit bears similarities with Individual Learning Accounts, which had been implemented with mixed success in various parts of the UK from the late 1990s onwards, as well as other vouchers schemes in France, Austria, Italy and the US.²³

While \$500 might appear a modest amount, this was intended to offset remaining costs after the 70% or 90% funding the government already provided for training courses under SkillsFuture. As then-DPM Tharman articulated in the Budget 2015 statement, the government would top up the Credit periodically.

One observation, following the rollout of the SkillsFuture Credit, was that many were using their credits to pursue recreational interests such as learning foreign languages, photography or baking.²⁴ However, in practice it was hard to draw a firm distinction between training that was for individual interest versus that which could boost employability, as nearly every skill had the potential for the latter. The government also decided that to promote a culture of lifelong learning, the credit could be used by retirees and not just working adults.

In 2020, a further \$500 credit was provided, with a five-year expiry date to encourage timely reskilling. Mid-career workers received an additional \$500 top-up in the same year, and a further \$4,000 Mid-Career Credit in 2024, to support deeper reskilling and career transitions. The \$4,000 credit was more tightly scoped to a small number of courses deemed most relevant to employability, taking into consideration the earlier feedback.

In 2024, 260,000 Singaporeans used their SkillsFuture Credit. Of these, 28,000 citizens tapped on the new Mid-Career Credit in undertaking a substantive skills reboot. It was reported that since the scheme's inception in 2016, around 1.05 million Singaporeans, or 37% of the population, had used their SkillsFuture Credit.²⁵

²³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Individual Learning Accounts: Panacea or Pandora's Box?* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1787/203b21a8-en>.

²⁴ See, for instance, Samantha Boh, "Japanese, IT classes top SkillsFuture Credit scheme," *The Straits Times*, April 10, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/japanese-it-classes-top-skillsfuture-credit-scheme>.

²⁵ SkillsFuture Singapore, "SkillsFuture Year-in-Review 2024: Learners Shift to More Career-Relevant Training with the SkillsFuture Level-Up Programme," Press Release, April 9, 2025, <https://www.ssg.gov.sg/newsroom/skillsfuture-year-in-review-2024/>.

SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit

While the SkillsFuture Credit empowers individuals to take ownership of their learning, careers transformation must also take place at the enterprise level. Firms play a critical role in shaping job content, investing in skills, and creating opportunities for workers to apply new capabilities. Hence, it has been a priority to embed workforce development into business strategies and ensure that training translates into meaningful employment outcomes.

The SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit, introduced in 2020, helps firms defray up to 90% of out-of-pocket costs for enterprise and workforce transformation, up to a cap of \$10,000. This encourages businesses to build workforce capabilities in tandem with enterprise upgrading. As of November 2025, nearly 40,000 enterprises – about half of the eligible enterprises – had utilised the SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit.²⁶ As announced in Budget 2025, the scheme would be revamped from a reimbursement model to one that works like an “online wallet”, allowing companies to immediately offset eligible workforce transformation costs.

Enhanced Education and Career Guidance, Internships

The lifelong learning journey begins in schools and IHLs. Hence, Budget 2015 announced the development of a professional core of Education and Career Counsellors for schools and IHLs.²⁷ At Budget 2015, the government also announced plans to make IHL internships more structured and meaningful, with the intent to roll out enhanced internships in two thirds of polytechnic courses and half of ITE courses over the subsequent two years.

Earn and Learn / Work-Study Programmes

In line with the recommendation of the ASPIRE committee, the Earn and Learn programme was launched to enable polytechnic and ITE graduates to join the workforce while concurrently working towards a diploma or degree. These have evolved into SkillsFuture Work-Study Programmes, offered at the certificate, diploma and degree levels by the ITE, polytechnics and autonomous universities.

The courses blend classroom-based learning with structured on-the-job training, enabling individuals to gain industry-relevant experience while working toward nationally recognised qualifications. This model promotes applied learning, facilitates smoother school-to-work transitions, and supports continual career upgrading for working adults. Since its launch, the Work-Study Programmes have been expanded into a major education pathway for ITE graduates, with places for up to one third of each cohort of ITE students.

The number of trainees enrolled in ITE’s SkillsFuture Work-Study Diploma programmes increased from 500 in 2021 to around 1,300 in 2024, while those enrolled in the autonomous universities’ SkillsFuture Work-Study

²⁶ Gan Kim Yong, reply to Parliamentary Question on SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit, November 5, 2025, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/newsroom/written-reply-to-pq-on-utilisation-rates-of-skillsfuture-enterprise-credit--sfec--and-measures-to-encourage-sfec-use-before-expiry-in-2026/>.

²⁷ Shanmugaratnam, Budget Statement, 2015.

Degree programmes rose from 300 in 2021 to around 800 in 2023. According to MOE, around seven in 10 graduates remained with the companies that hired and trained them.²⁸

SkillsFuture Fellowships and Study Awards

To recognise and encourage deep skills mastery, SkillsFuture Fellowships and Study Awards were introduced in 2015. SkillsFuture Study Awards aimed to provide financial support to Singaporeans, particularly those in the early and middle stages of their career, to develop and deepen specialist skills in growth areas or to meet social needs.²⁹ Award winners received a monetary award of up to \$5,000 to help them with the cost of undertaking work-related education and training. The government targeted to give up to 2,000 awards annually in the medium term to Singaporeans committed to developing and deepening the skills needed by strategic sectors which are in need of manpower and skills. The SkillsFuture Study Awards were discontinued in 2022.

The SkillsFuture Fellowships are the highest skills accolade for individuals who demonstrate excellence in their respective fields and a commitment to mentoring others. They recognise Singaporeans with at least 10 years of working experience in a particular industry or occupation as masters of skills and mentors of future talent. Recipients receive a monetary award of \$10,000 to continue their pursuit of skills mastery.

SkillsFuture Career Transition Programme

During the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, the government introduced the SGUnited Traineeship and the SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways programmes, to mitigate the risk of unemployment by offering traineeships to new workforce entrants as well as mid-career workers respectively.

In 2022, these were replaced by the SkillsFuture Career Transition Programme (SCTP). The SCTP is conducted on Train-and-Place modality where training providers provide career advisory and assistance as part of the training to help trainees in their job search. The course duration ranges from three to 12 months, with training conducted either full-time or part-time. The SCTP complements the Career Conversion Programmes offered by WSG, many of which are on a Train-and-Place mode.

SkillsFuture Level-Up Programme

The SkillsFuture Level-Up Programme, introduced in 2024, supports individuals aged 40 and above to pursue upskilling and reskilling to stay relevant and competitive amidst a rapidly changing economy.³⁰ The programme provides mature citizens a further \$4,000 SkillsFuture Credit (Mid-Career) top-up for use on selected industry-relevant programmes, expanded subsidies for a second full-time diploma, and a training allowance for selected

²⁸ Ministry of Education, reply to Parliamentary Question on Work-Study Programmes, February 5, 2025, <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/parliamentary-replies/20250205-work-study-programmes>.

²⁹ SkillsFuture Singapore, "SkillsFuture Study Awards," Press Release, February 25, 2015, <https://www.ssg.gov.sg/newsroom/skillsfuture-study-awards/>.

³⁰ Ministry of Education, "Infosheet 2: Enhancing Support for Mid-Career Individuals Under the SkillsFuture Level-Up Programme", March 6, 2025, <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/20250306-infosheet-2-enhancing-support-for-mid-career-individuals-under-the-skillsfuture-level-up-programme>.

full-time courses to offset income loss during upskilling. These measures aim to reduce financial barriers and enable mid-career workers to acquire in-demand skills in growth areas.

Workplace Learning

Workplace learning has taken on increasing importance as a complement to classroom-based training. Supported by SSG, the National Centre of Excellence for Workplace Learning (NACE) was established in 2018 to spur the adoption of best-in-class workplace learning practices and help enterprises to become effective learning organisations. IHLs appointed as NACE centres³¹ partnered the Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training and the Singapore-Germany Chamber of Industry and Commerce to develop a National Workplace Learning Framework for adoption by interested organisations.

Outcomes, Challenges and Opportunities

Training Participation Outcomes

In 2025, 10 years after its launch, SkillsFuture supports over 28,000 courses offered by IHLs and private training providers.³² The courses range from full qualifications to short courses to meet specific industry needs. This has enabled over 500,000 Singaporeans (over a fifth of the workforce) to be trained every year. Singapore's overall training participation rate among the resident workforce in 2024 stood at about 41%, lower than the COVID-19 peak of around 50% in 2021 but higher than the 35% in 2015.³³

Employer participation in the SkillsFuture movement has doubled from 12,000 companies in 2015 to 24,000 in 2024, with the number of employees sent for SSG-supported training increasing from 160,000 in 2015 to 241,000 in 2024. SSG has also reported rising learner validation scores for SkillsFuture-supported training.³⁴

It has proved more difficult to relate training to worker productivity or firm performance at the aggregate level, though studies have been done to evaluate individual programmes. For instance, a study by economists at the Ministry of Trade and Industry found that polytechnic graduates with a Work-Study Post-Diploma, commanded a wage premium of around 9% one to two years after completing the programme, and continued to enjoy a premium of around 6% in the subsequent two years.³⁵

³¹ These are the five polytechnics, the Singapore Institute of Technology and the Institute for Adult Learning.

³² SkillsFuture Singapore, "Celebrating a Decade of Empowering Singaporeans to Upskill and Reskill, and Advance in Their Careers," Press Release, May 23, 2025, <https://www.ssg.gov.sg/newsroom/celebrating-a-decade-of-empowering-singaporeans-to-upskill-and-reskill--and-advance-in-their-careers/>.

³³ "Chart: Training Indicators," Manpower Research and Statistics Department, Ministry of Manpower, accessed November 5, 2025, <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Training-Indicators-Chart.aspx>.

³⁴ Kok Yam Tan and Dilys Boey, "The Evolving SkillsFuture Movement: A Decade of Workforce Transformation," *Ethos* 29, 8 (Singapore: Civil Service College, 2025), <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-29/the-evolving-skillsfuture-movement-a-decade-of-workforce-transformation/>.

³⁵ Audrey Ling and Damian Allan Tan, "Impact of SkillsFuture Work-Study Programme on Wage Outcomes of Participants," *Economic Survey of Singapore* Third Quarter 2024, 42, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/resources/economic-survey-of-singapore/economic-survey-of-singapore-and-feature-articles/impact-of-skillsfuture-work-study-programme-on-wage-outcomes-of-participants/>.

Challenge for Individuals: Training Take-Up, Translating Skills into Employment Outcomes

While there has been progress over the past decade, challenges remain in seeking to increase training take-up and employer support. Workers face challenges balancing work, training and family commitments. Steps taken to address these include modularising courses with flexible timing and modes of delivery, as well as the provision of a training allowance for longer courses under the SkillsFuture Level-Up Programme to offset the opportunity cost of training.

To make training more accessible, particularly to workers who have not been in formal education for many years, training could be personalised according to individual learning preferences. This could include, for instance, experiential learning through workshops and projects that integrate learning with work.

More fundamentally, workers may be hesitant to train if they do not perceive that training will result in better job opportunities, higher wages or career progression.³⁶ Initiatives such as NTUC's Company Training Committees, which tie training support to employment outcomes, therefore help to ensure that training pays off for workers.

In the next bound of SkillsFuture, a key challenge is to translate the considerable investment in training into employment outcomes, such as career progression, wage growth or career resilience. Making training and skills an integral part of career planning and progression across industry – a skills-first approach outlined in section on Skills-First Approach in Workforce Development – could help in this regard.

Challenge for Firms: Encouraging Industry-Led Training

An ongoing challenge is how to encourage those employers who do not see the benefits of investing in staff training. Hence, training should be integrated with a firm's business needs and transformation plans, so that it translates into tangible productivity gains. This could encompass formal training courses, as well as workplace learning or on-the-job training. Firms that require customised training could benefit from a system aggregator that pools training needs and matches them with suitable providers.³⁷

In addition, some firms may not invest in worker training for fear of losing trained workers to competitors. This may be a concern particularly for small and medium enterprises that are unable to match salaries offered by larger firms. To address this concern, firms should be encouraged to see human capital development as a means of attracting and retaining talent. Countries such as Germany and Switzerland have a strong tradition of industry-led training, where firms see it as their collective responsibility to train workers for their industry and build up a pool of skilled workers from which all firms may benefit.³⁸

Since 2020, SSG has identified "Queen Bee" companies – industry leaders with strong sectoral expertise – to support skills and talent development in other companies, particularly SMEs. SkillsFuture Queen Bee

³⁶ National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), *Our Workers' Compact*, (Singapore: NTUC, 2023), https://www.ntuc.org.sg/Uportal/News/Flipbooks/EWMC_OurWorkersCompact.

³⁷ Terence Ho, "Singapore's Lifelong Learning Scene Is Ripe for Transformation," *The Straits Times*, November 11, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/singapores-lifelong-learning-scene-is-ripe-for-transformation>.

³⁸ Marius R. Busemeyer and Christine Trampusch, *The Political Economy of Collective Skill Formation* (Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://academic.oup.com/book/34606>.

companies include manufacturing firms Bosch Rexroth, Omron, Siemens and HP Singapore, which support industry in areas such as the adoption of digital and sustainable technology.³⁹ For instance, Inventit Technology received support from Queen Bee company Omron's Automation Technology Centre to develop proofs-of-concept to meet their clients' needs. Omron mentored Inventit's engineers and provided on-the-job training to help them acquire the knowledge and skills to deliver customised robotic handler solutions to clients.⁴⁰

As technological advances transform tasks and jobs, firms should be encouraged to redesign jobs with human workers in mind – not to simply replace workers with automation and AI, but to be deliberate about designing job roles where human workers can complement technology most effectively. Training must therefore be paired with job redesign.

Skills-First Approach in Workforce Development

To address these complex, intersecting challenges, Singapore has set its sights on a skills-first approach: recognising skills and proficiency, and not just qualifications, as the primary currency for employment, career progression and organisational performance. Recognising and rewarding skills will encourage timely, industry-relevant training, while facilitating greater mobility across jobs and sectors.

Career mobility is particularly important at a time when rapid technological advances are transforming industries and jobs. A skills-first approach would enhance workers' career resilience and employability, thereby expanding their career options. Concurrently, it would give employers access to a larger pool of potential hires. This would help overcome labour market inefficiencies, mitigating mismatches in the supply and demand for skills.

As workers' willingness to pursue training depends on whether the skills they acquire are recognised by employers, there is a need for a comprehensive system of skills recognition and certification that is trusted by employers.⁴¹ It is therefore important to develop robust ways to capture and verify skills acquired through work experience and on-the-job learning, and to match skills to tasks in order to support skills portability. This will make it easier for workers to leverage their past work experience and transferable skillsets to enter new sectors and occupations, topping up their skills with targeted training where necessary.

Adopting a skills-first approach will require a coordinated effort across stakeholders, and will take time to be fully embraced. In October 2025, IAL launched the Centre for Skills-First Practices to raise awareness and build skills-first capabilities among employers, training providers and other stakeholders. The centre's aim is to develop a trusted, inclusive skills-first ecosystem where skills and proficiency guide labour market signalling, career mobility and human capital investment.

³⁹ SkillsFuture Singapore, "SkillsFuture Queen Bee Initiative Strengthens the Role of Industry Leaders in Building Capabilities of Workforce and Enterprises," Press Release, October 19, 2022, <https://www.ssg.gov.sg/newsroom/skillsfuture-queen-bee-initiative-strengthens-the-role-of-industry-leaders-in-building-capabilities-of-workforce-and-enterprises/>.

⁴⁰ SkillsFuture Singapore, "SkillsFuture Queen Bee Initiative."

⁴¹ Soon Joo Gog, Johnny Sung, and Matt Sigelman, *Skills-First: Are We There Yet?*, Centre for Skills-First Practices Working Paper 1 (Singapore: Institute for Adult Learning, 2025), <https://www.ial.edu.sg/getattachment/040b0eff-3a13-4634-996b-22d8aaf28cc5/Paper-1-Report.pdf>.

Conclusion

The SkillsFuture movement has come far in the past 10 years as a vital pillar of Singapore's socio-economic system, supporting the centrality of work and employment within the country's social compact. The range and quality of training courses available has greatly expanded, with greater state support for company-led and individual-directed training.

Amid technological change and job transformation, the importance of SkillsFuture is set to grow. The key challenge in the next bound of SkillsFuture is to ensure the investment in training translates into better firm performance, as well as better employment outcomes for workers. Reskilling must keep pace with technological changes, and be aligned closely with organisational transformation and job redesign.

Going forward, the SkillsFuture movement must be embedded in a skills-first approach and ecosystem that supports career health and resilience, enabling rapid reskilling in response to labour market changes, and providing opportunities for mobility across jobs and sectors. This will enable the movement to fulfill the twin aims of enabling firm competitiveness and worker employability.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the SkillsFuture Movement represent continuity in the evolution of Singapore's CET system, or should it be seen as a paradigm shift in Singapore's approach to CET? Why?
2. To what extent has the SkillsFuture Movement succeeded in changing mindsets and attitudes towards lifelong learning and reskilling? How can it do better?
3. How can the outcomes of SkillsFuture programmes and initiatives be better measured and tracked?
4. Why is the impetus for SkillsFuture stronger in 2025 than it was when the movement was launched in 2015?
5. How have workforce and individual learning needs evolved since 2015, and how is the SkillsFuture movement adapting in response?
6. What further enhancements to SkillsFuture are needed to best prepare workers and employers for the challenges of job disruption arising from generative AI and other technological advances?