

Seminar on SG50 and Beyond: Singapore's Skills Training Systems

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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) organised a seminar on “SG50 and Beyond: Singapore’s Skills Training Systems” and the book launch of *A Breakthrough in Vocational and Technical Education* on 17 February 2015.

The seminar consisted of a panel discussion on strengthening Singapore’s applied education pathways and how the ITE system in particular contributes to Singapore’s social and economic development. For the discussion, Dr Law was joined by Mr Choo Chiau Beng, Senior Adviser, Keppel Corporation Limited and member of the ASPIRE Committee (2013–2014); and Associate Professor Irene Ng of the Department of Social Work at the National University of Singapore.

This was followed by a dialogue session with Senior Minister of State for Education, Indranee Rajah who chaired the 2014 ASPIRE Committee that made important recommendations on vocational education in Singapore. Ms Indranee is also a member of the SkillsFuture Council.

The event concluded with the launch of *A Breakthrough in Vocational and Technical Education*, a book which details the development of the Institute of Technical Studies, written by Dr Law, who served as its Director and Chief Executive Officer for twenty-five years, between 1982 and 2007.

Welcome Remarks

Mr Bruce Poh, Director and Chief Executive Officer of ITE recounted the development of the ITE and paid tribute to Dr Law for his legacy. Mr Poh also talked about the ITE's new five-year plan called "ITE Trailblazer" which would provide students with more ICT-enabled self-learning programmes as well as structured career planning.

In his welcome remarks, IPS Director Janadas Devan said that the ITE has had to thrive in spite of the elitist academic culture in Singapore. He noted the ITE's role in providing careers for all Singaporeans, making sure that all Singaporeans shared in the country's success.

Panel Discussion – SG50 and Beyond: Singapore's Skills Training Systems

During the panel discussion, Associate Professor (A/P) Ng described how Singapore's intergenerational mobility could be considered moderate to moderately low when compared internationally, based on her own research and research from the Ministry of Finance. She pointed to research suggesting that increasing the intensity of streaming in schools typically led to a widening achievement gap between students, adding to gaps caused by income disparity between households. She reiterated her belief in the ITE's role in technical education: impacting the types of jobs that ITE graduates can get and on their subsequent career progression. She emphasised the importance of employer engagement — that employers must signal their demand for the students and their skills by offering attractive wages.

Mr Choo said he was concerned about the growing sense of elitism in Singapore, in part due to Singapore's policies and cultural traditions. In his opinion, Singapore was more open and less stratified in his youth. He urged Singaporeans to support increasing the time, effort, and money spent on pre-school education, and to ensure that every Singaporean born in the future would reap the benefits of that investment; otherwise Singapore would become increasingly stratified.

He also spoke of the maritime industry. Once labelled as a "sunset industry" by the government, it was unable to attract good graduates from universities. But with trained workers from polytechnics and the ITE, and complemented by foreign workers, Singapore's maritime industry has not only survived, but has become recognised around the world.

Finally, he expressed his fear that children in Singapore were being raised in an environment where they were discouraged from doing work that would "dirty their hands", and becoming far too reliant on domestic help. To him, the ITE was instrumental in changing this attitude, as well as fulfilling the aspiration of making every Singaporean count.

The final presentation was by Dr Law. He focused on how the ITE had responded to the changing needs of Singapore's economy and the changing aspirations of ITE students. In order to do both, the ITE had to engage in a 20-year rebranding exercise, split into five-year plans. Many changes were required during this time, such as the consolidation of various smaller vocational training facilities into three modern "mega-campus" so that the infrastructure could be improved with a critical mass; marketing and publicity campaigns to raise ITE's standing in the public sphere; and attaining standards of operational excellence.

Question-and-Answer Session

Two key themes emerged in the session. First, ITE training, and ultimately all education, must have a practical focus, particularly for employability. Second, Singaporeans need to respect all types of work and workers.

A practical focus on the workplace was brought up by contrasting the approaches taken by Singaporean universities, against that of polytechnics and the ITE. For example, university engineering departments had removed a work experience requirement from their degrees for several years (this is not presently the case) because they were focused on “training graduates who would do post-graduate degrees and PhDs, and become lecturers again”, placing insufficient emphasis on the requirements of industry. Companies that employed these graduates had to spend additional resources preparing them for their new jobs, particularly preparing them to work with blue-collar workers, or getting them used to the idea of “getting their hands dirty”. This is in contrast to the approach that the polytechnics and ITE take, in making their primary focus ensuring that graduates are able to adapt quickly to new working environments.

Also raised was the attitude Singaporean society had towards the ITE. While ITE graduates could attest to the adequacy of their education, there was still a lingering belief that a university degree should be the end-goal of any student, even if they were doing well with their skills-based training. This thinking needs to be addressed, particularly in the media; a university degree is often unnecessary for progression in many types of occupations. What is more important is ensuring that the training from schools like the ITE is relevant to the industry; something that ITE works very hard to achieve. While an individual's aspirations should not be suppressed, it is also necessary to be realistic about the uses of a degree.

Some audience members felt that the perceived decline in service standards in Singapore was due to a lack of training provided by employers. But for employers, training workers did not guarantee that trained workers would stay on in the company. Audience members suggested that the government could look into how to help companies train their employees and apprentices in return for higher wages for the trained workers, and that employers should better signal their need for trained workers by raising wages.

In summary, the panel spoke about the three Ps of the ITE:

- **Pride:** Build recognition for mastery of skills in Singapore
- **Pay:** Acknowledge the importance of ITE graduates' skills and remunerate them accordingly
- **Passion:** Allow ITE students to develop their passion as they choose their course of study and careers



From Left: Senior Minister of State for Education Indranee Rajah and IPS Director Janadas Devan

Dialogue with Senior Minister of State for Education, Indranee Rajah

The panel discussion was followed by a dialogue session with Senior Minister of State for Education, Indranee Rajah. IPS Director Janadas Devan asked what Ms Indranee considered to be the major impediment to changing the cultural mindset regarding the ITE. She replied it was in ensuring that everyone could attain good outcomes regardless of the education path they took, be it university, polytechnic or ITE.

Such good outcomes were evident from testimonials by several ITE alumni at the event. Several participants noted that success stories coming out of the ITE should be better publicised. For instance, an overwhelming proportion of the 2002 cohort of graduates began their careers as skilled workers with none being managers. Ten years later in 2011, 18% had moved up to become either managers or working proprietors.

ITE alumni said that their hands-on training was vital to them learning how to manage their own businesses, and Ms Indranee noted that many ITE graduates had chosen to carve out their own destinies in their careers. By spreading this message, Singaporeans would come to see that the skills-based education of the ITE and the polytechnics was a process, rather than ends in themselves.

Ms Indranee said that while the government was not convinced by the argument for a minimum wage policy, it recognised that there were challenges in the way wages and training were handled in the past, and thus sought to remedy this by various means, notably with Workfare scheme and later the Progressive Wage Model.

She added that what was most important in these situations was to make sure both sides were beneficiaries in the training process; workers would get better wages and employers would be able to find workers that were more capable. It was also important to support smaller companies that, in contrast to large companies with their own training departments, often found it challenging to provide the mentoring or time off needed to take on worker training duties.

The government's approach to dealing with these challenges recognises that different sectors have different needs, and that a one-size-fits-all solution is impractical.

Finally, Ms Indranee spoke about the future of ASPIRE and SkillsFuture. While the ASPIRE Committee was geared towards pre-employment studies, the committee also looked into other related topics, such as lifelong learning. At the same time, the Ministry of Manpower had its Continuing Education and Training Masterplan, or CET 2020, which focuses on training when one enters the workforce. Both the ASPIRE Committee and CET 2020 have been consolidated into the SkillsFuture Council, forming a comprehensive strategy for education and skills training from primary school until the end of one's life, and involves several ministries as well as the cooperation of companies.



Launch of Dr Law's book. From left: Dr Rick Lee, Mr Janadas Devan, Mr Choo Chiau Beng, Ms Indranee Rajah, Dr Law Song Seng, Mr Bruce Poh, A/P Irene Ng, Dr Gillian Koh

Book Launch

The event concluded with the launch of Dr Law's book, *A Breakthrough in Vocational and Technical Education*, by Ms Indranee Rajah.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



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