

Budget 2015 to focus on upgrading of skills for more opportunities: Indranee

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SINGAPORE: At a dialogue session on the future of skills training organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on Tuesday (Feb 17), participants acknowledged that vocational institutes in Singapore have transformed over the years. However some felt there is some disparity with their university counterparts.

"It's a known fact now that income inequality in Singapore is high compared to other industrialised nations and so we do need wage correction in order to close the gap between graduates and non graduates and part of it is about building career paths, building apprenticeship models and life long learning," said Assoc Prof Irene Ng, Director of the Social Service Research Centre at the National University of Singapore. "The challenge is in how to move into this stage in our post-secondary education."

That is exactly what the Government is looking into under the SkillsFuture Council mandate, and Senior Minister of State for Law and Education, Indranee Rajah said this year's Singapore Budget, due to be delivered on Monday, will see Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam addressing these issues.

"The overall thrust of it is making sure that Singaporeans are equipped for the future, making sure that they are equipped for jobs that are going to be constantly changing or jobs that may disappear, ensuring that Singaporeans are able to be relevant throughout life and giving them that assurance that there are opportunities," she said.

"And all of these come with ensuring that they are able to be equipped to cope with the kinds of jobs that the future economy will demand." One area the SkillsFuture Council is looking into, is a skills progression pathway, developed for specific sectors, said Ms Indranee, who is a member of the council.

The aim is to give workers the chance to progress in their careers, based on skills acquired, and to promote social mobility.

"Singapore must always be a place where you must be able to progress no matter what your starting point. And I know that there is a sense that if you don't start with a relatively comfortable background, you may not be able to progress far," she said.

"We want to create and make sure our system is such that no matter what your starting point, no matter what your background, you have a chance to progress provided that you do your part, with the right determination, right attitude, right sense of resilience. The Government does its part by providing the right framework, the right opportunity and the right support," Ms Indranee added.

"So the whole thinking behind ASPIRE which has now become SkillsFuture, is that wherever you start, let's say you start with Nitec, you should be able to progress in your job, you should be able to get additional training, skills, that can take the form of additional academic qualifications.

"But it can also take the form of professional or technical certifications that will allow you to climb up and then at some stage if let's say you have acquired all your technical skills and it becomes clear that you should be going into a management or supervisory position, to enable you to have access to the kind of training that will make you a manager or a supervisor and you can climb up the ladder that way. So it addresses social mobility in that sense. We must create a structure and a framework that allows people to move up and to do better and to progress irrespective of where they started."

The dialogue participants, which included 100 educators, civil servants and business leaders, said employer engagement is also critical. They said employers should work closely with educational institutions to develop training programmes and go beyond paper qualifications to recognise and reward, skills.

The man who saw the transformation of the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) through the years said this focus on life long acquisition of skills is something vocational institutes can contribute to.

Said Dr Law Song Seng, the former director and CEO of ITE. "One of the things we are very clear about is that it must be a competency based training system. That means the training programme and pedagogy must be very anchored on occupational skills," he said.

"The next is to ensure that the new curriculum that we have is something that prepares our graduates for the future and not just the skills. What I mean is - we create what we call the hands-on, minds-on, hearts-on education. And this is really holistic education.

"It is one that motivates the student, assist in their learning, equip them well so that they can continue to work on their skills when they enter the workforce," Dr Law said.

"If you have a greater recognition of your skills rather than qualifications, I think that will also help us to build a more inclusive society where you can start to value the person for what he does, his job, and not for the credentials he brings to the workforce."

The event also saw the launch of Dr Law's book titled A Breakthrough In Vocational and Technical Education: The Singapore Story.