

Report on the Closed-Door Discussion on the Use of SkillsFuture and Employability of the Malay-Muslim Community

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IN 2016, *Berita Harian* reported that only 8.4 per cent of the 126,000 Singaporeans who had utilised their SkillsFuture credit were from the Malay-Muslim Community—an under representation of the community. What are the reasons behind the lack of participation? Are there specific obstacles or challenges that hindered the community from utilising this facility?



Photo from [SkillsFuture SG's Facebook page](#).

To examine this issue, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)—supported by the research units of Mendaki, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), the Singapore Muslim Women's

Association (PPIS), and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)—organised a Closed-Door discussion on 2 February 2018 with over 30 experts and practitioners from the public and private sectors. This would be the first of many discussions planned for this informal network.

The discussion was chaired by IPS Research Fellow Dr Shamsuri Juhari. The guest speakers were Nur Ellisa Abdul Rahman, Sales Support Manager at Baby Barn Pte Ltd; Suhaimi Salleh, President & Chief Executive Officer of SSA Academy Pte Ltd; and Associate Professor Tan Khee Giap, Co-Director of the Asia Competitiveness Institute. They each provided different perspectives: as a Singaporean who has utilised SkillsFuture credit; a service provider of training courses for SkillsFuture; and a researcher who has done research on the Malay Muslim Community, respectively.

Presentation by Nur Ellisa Abdul Rahman

Ms Nur Ellisa spoke about her personal journey and the challenges she had to overcome to pursue higher education. Although she credited SkillsFuture for spurring her on, she found the process of searching for the right course and funding confusing, and there was a lack of information online. She also made an appeal for the government to top-up the SkillsFuture credit so that others like her would be able to continually upgrade their skills and advance in their careers. She added that the lack of recognition for Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) by businesses, especially small and medium enterprises, would prevent working adults from taking up SkillsFuture courses. It was also not clear if a WSQ diploma was on par, lower, or higher in value than diplomas offered by private institutions, ITE and the polytechnics.

Presentation by Suhaimi Salleh

Mr Suhaimi's presentation gave an overview of the training programmes his company provides and the profile of the participants. He said that while the training courses were well received, the take-up rate within the Malay community was very low; among the Malays who do take up the courses, close to half were inmates who enrolled as part of their rehabilitation programme. He also found that, between a WSQ course (which is highly subsidised and therefore cheaper, but where participants would be assessed to receive certification) and a non-WSQ course (which is more expensive but where no assessment is necessary) on the same subject, Malays were more likely to choose the non-WSQ course. He wondered if this was due to a tendency to avoid taking tests and examinations, even if it means paying more for the lessons.

Presentation by A/P Tan Khee Giap

A/P Tan highlighted some of the problems faced by the Malay Muslim Community. This included the lack of mentors in business to guide younger members of the community, issues of discrimination by employers, and the lack of understanding from members of the larger community. He said that, to address these problems, there has to be a lot more engagement between members of the different communities. One way would be to set up a Malay Entrepreneurship Centre, and invite prominent members of all communities, and not just the

Malay community, to give talks and provide mentorship. On their part, members of the larger community must also take the initiative to reach out to the minority ethnic group.

Discussion

The discussion revolved around several issues, which included discrimination and negative stereotyping of the community. To combat such impressions, one participant said that they had coordinated a visit to a local mosque for non-Muslim members of their organisation in an effort to help them understand Islam better. Another participant opined that the Malay community must similarly learn how to better integrate themselves with other Singaporeans.

Participants also agreed that some members of the Malay community were unaware of schemes that could help them enhance their careers. One participant said that it would be hard to attract the interest of such workers unless they were incentivised. However, another participant was quick to point out that this was not a trait specific only to the Malay community, but one seen in other communities as well. Another participant suggested that more data was needed to better understand the problem and that if no data can be made available, it was up to the community to collect and analyse it.

Dr Shamsuri noted that, at the individual level, a mindset change was needed to resolve this issue. In closing, he said that, while there was a lot of frustration, there was also much passion for remedies to the situation.

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