

MENDAKI-IPS Policy Dialogue 2021

Gearing the Malay/Muslim Workforce for the Future

By Aisyah Yusoff

On 30 October 2021, the annual MENDAKI-IPS Policy Dialogue was held at the Lifelong Learning Institute. The hybrid event, which was screened live on Zoom and YouTube, was physically attended by 20 MENDAKI and IPS invitees. This marks the third year of MENDAKI's collaboration with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in hosting the dialogue.

Organised as part of Yayasan MENDAKI's *Raikan Ilmu* ("Celebrate Knowledge") month, this year's policy dialogue aimed to engage the Malay/Muslim community in a discussion on national policy issues relating to employment and lifelong learning.

Gearing the Workforce for the Future

This year's theme was "Gearing the Workforce for the Future". The speakers and panellists provided their insights on growth sectors and lifelong learning, and how Malay/Muslim youth and workers could take advantage of available policies to pivot towards growth industries.

They also discussed reskilling opportunities for the Malay/Muslim workforce to maintain a competitive advantage in the future. An essential aspect was to cultivate a growth mindset among the populace, to transform itself into a career-mobile community.



Presenters (from left): Dr Woo Jun Jie (IPS), Dr Gog Soon Joo (SSG), Mr Zaqy Mohamad

Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Senior Minister of State for Defence and Manpower and Deputy Chairman of Yayasan MENDAKI, was Guest-of-Honour. He was joined by speakers Dr Woo

Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow from IPS, and Dr Gog Soon Joo, Chief Skills Officer of SkillsFuture SG. The policy dialogue was moderated by Mr Faisal Aman, Team Lead of the Research and Design Growth Group from MENDAKI.

Panellists Mr Abdul Samad Abdul Wahab, Vice President of NTUC Central Committee, and Ms Asyikeen Azhar, a data scientist, joined the policy dialogue online via Zoom.

The Opening Address

Mr Zaqy announced that MENDAKI has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG). He spoke about the need to remain competitive as the global economy enthusiastically embraces digitisation and innovation across various industries. There is a pressing need for workers to equip themselves with the right skills to maintain employability.

Based on the 2021 National Day Rally speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Mr Zaqy said there has been significant progress in the last decade with an increase in individuals with higher education qualification, good jobs and a higher income.

Looking to the Malay/Muslim community, he quoted from the Rally that the number of Malay/Muslim Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians (PMETs) have nearly doubled from 2010 to 2020. However, more could be done to increase this number to allow the community to be more economically independent.

Future Economy; Future Jobs

Dr Woo Jun Jie spoke about the projected changes in the future economy, with societies being pulled into the rapid currents of a hyper-globalised, digitised and interconnected world. Dr Woo remarked that the global economy is adopting an “on-demand” model, one that is advancing in tandem with the emerging norm of humans working alongside new technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI). It is foreseeable that there will be a skills gap among workers with the developments in automated technology.

Furthermore, he cited that 85 million jobs may be displaced by 2025, and there will be 97 million new roles that require advanced skillsets. However, while there is a significant inclination towards machine technology, according to the *Future of Jobs Report* from the World Economic Forum, Dr Woo posited that the top 10 skills for future workers are principally concerned with human management skills. Dr Woo dubbed human intuition as the “X factor” due to the workforce becoming increasingly technologically driven.

Striving in the Innovative Economy

Dr Gog Soon Joo thematically advocated for “active living” — for Singaporeans to espouse a lifelong learning system to remain employable for life. She stressed that workers should embrace a learning pathway in conjunction with their working career to facilitate their pivot to adjacent or new areas, if necessary. She cited the future of work and employment as “flexible, fluid, and dynamic”.

Dr Gog expanded on the skills needed for advancement in a worker’s multi-stage career journey. She emphasised the importance of capitalising on two emerging skills: first, digital

skills that comprise technology application and data analytics; and second, green skills that include carbon footprint management, environmental and sustainability management. These skills are paired alongside other “domain skills” such as engineering-ICT, health and wellness, and trade and craft, etc.

In conclusion, Dr Gog had put forward the “critical core skills” for the future economy expected from workers, which include thinking critically, interacting with others and staying relevant. She added that SkillsFuture SG provides courses that enable keen workers to learn new skills relevant to the changing workforce landscape, and offers courses to develop their critical core skills.

Panel Discussion: Advice to Malay/Muslim Workers

Mr Abdul Samad and Ms Asyikeen provided encouragement and advice to both young and mature Malay/Muslim workers to upskill and to seek a career that is fulfilling in the long run.

Mr Abdul Samad elaborated on the function of NTUC, which emphasises the four Ps (protection, progression, placement and privileges). He disclosed that there are more than 1,300 Malay/Muslim union leaders, making up 25 per cent of the total leadership at NTUC.

Furthermore, Mr Abdul Samad shared that NTUC has in place an “Operation and Technology Roadmap”, which helps workers pick up new skills and to even seek jobs overseas. He explained that the union leaders encourage workers to focus on training courses to attain better wages and to kick-start their journeys to explore new jobs, should they wish to.

Ms Asyikeen addressed the generational aspirations of workers, sharing her own experiences as a young data analyst professional. She noted that the Millennial generation of workers often seek out dynamic, multi-directional and boundary-less career paths, and are less concerned with an upward and linear career.

While she expressed that younger workers appreciate variety in their job assignments and expect great change, she also relayed that many are in a “position of luxury” as they can step back to take stock of their well-being to decide if they should continue on or switch jobs.

Moreover, Ms Asyikeen said the internet is a good platform to link up with individuals, to learn new skills and discover other unfamiliar career routes.

Discussion Segment

IPS Research Fellow Dr Shamsuri Juhari was invited to share his insights and provide comments. He commended the ongoing collaborations MENDAKI has with organisations and how they can leverage one another to provide national assistance.

Commenting on knowledge attainment, he suggested that theory does not always explain reality. He suggested that at times, practice should come first, before certain theories are taught to students. This is because they might find themselves “lost” after graduating from a curriculum that is disconnected from the new changes resulting from a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world.

A participant shared concerns about communicating job specifications to job seekers, amidst the uncertainty in the workforce brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The participant asked the panel on ways in which employers should communicate such unexpected changes to job seekers.

In response to the question, Dr Woo stressed the support employers should render to their employees to help them adapt to the new changes, and the need to transfer necessary digital knowledge while affirming the core skills of the employees.

Dr Gog added on to this, quoting LinkedIn data that the average Singaporean worker stays in their job for four to five years, while the younger ones for 1.8 years. Therefore, employers need to better manage and create a workplace that is engaging for employees.

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