

Building trust in SkillsFuture scheme

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The Straits Times, 4 December 2015

"I DIDN'T do well in school. I think employers won't want the kind of qualifications I have."

That statement sums up the sentiments of many of my peers, and I sympathise as I, too, went to a neighbourhood school near my home in Ang Mo Kio, then to a polytechnic before getting a degree through a private education institution in Singapore.

Last year, I completed my master's degree in social policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Late bloomers like my peers and me have struggled in a system that has, for years, rewarded those who did well early on in life, and was less than forgiving towards those who did not. That is so despite the latter group possibly having the skills, initiative and mindset that will make them employees of choice.

How does this play out in the local job market?

An intense paper chase has seen the share of residents aged 25 to 34 with university degrees soar from 7.2 per cent in 1990 to 52 per cent last year.

Singapore may have mistakenly assumed that "lecture-driven knowledge" leads to prosperity, when as author Nassim Nicholas Taleb points out in his book, *Antifragile*, it is wealth that leads to the rise in education levels.

Related to this is that Singapore's well-qualified workforce seems to be struggling to raise productivity, with this year being the third consecutive year of decline.

What do the head honchos say is impeding productivity gains?

The results of a 2014 survey of 150 chief financial officers in Singapore by human resource consulting firm Robert Half rated "motivating employees" (54 per cent) as the top factor in raising productivity of their teams.

Other factors such as "improving training and development of employees" (40 per cent) or "better adoption of technology" (25 per cent) ranked lower.

It is possible that career schemes that fast-track new hires based on academic qualifications disenfranchise others who could punch above their weight with the right grooming and motivation.

But change is afoot with a new national push to encourage the workforce to hone deep and specialist skills, to equip themselves for an economy continually disrupted by new technology and innovation. Under the SkillsFuture scheme announced earlier this year, over two million Singaporeans aged 25 and above will get an initial \$500 to use on courses such as early childhood education, culinary skills and language lessons.

But SkillsFuture represents a lot more than an "Edusave" scheme for adults, if one may use the Education Ministry's funding scheme for students as a comparison. Fresh polytechnic and

Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates will be given a head start in jobs related to their areas of study. Supervisors and managers in Singapore's small and medium-sized enterprises can also get help with leadership training under the scheme. It sends a signal from the top that staying competitive in the changing economy means renewing skills and learning new ones, not just depending on past grades.

But given society's long-time fixation on academic qualifications, it is not surprising that some parents and students remain sceptical about the SkillsFuture scheme. They typically take the view that a degree is essential to career progression, and point to how a university graduate may earn twice as much in starting pay as those from the ITE and polytechnics. These mindsets will change only if the system moves towards one where salaries and hiring correlate more with work aptitude than credentials.

The civil service has taken the lead. From this August, non-degree holders will be hired under the same scheme as university graduates, and similarly assessed for performance and potential.

To take it further, the Public Service Commission should reconsider its automatic placement of scholarship recipients into leadership grooming schemes. Instead, candidates for the Public Service Leadership Programme should be selected from a common pool, which would provide for more equitable competition.

The same can be said for the Management Associate schemes in the private sector.

Employers in the private sector can also go beyond academic qualifications as the sole measure for employees, by giving more emphasis to previous employer testimonials, past internship or work experience, or a standardised test for all new hires.

After all, the promotion of diversity in the workplace should go beyond the physical characteristics of ethnicity and gender to include individuals with different backgrounds and life experiences.

Nurturing a risk-taking culture, making every school a "good" school and improving social mobility are among the ideals Singapore aspires to.

SkillsFuture can play a bigger part in this. It must not only be about the imparting of skills, especially when the future is uncertain and adaptability will be vital. It must also be about the recognition that through the process of unlearning and relearning, one's formal qualifications matter less and less. The sum of these processes should better define the individual - and be an appropriate measure of his worth - than school grades.

After all, in the "real" world of work, academic qualifications are crucial only insofar as they correlate to actual work proficiency.

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