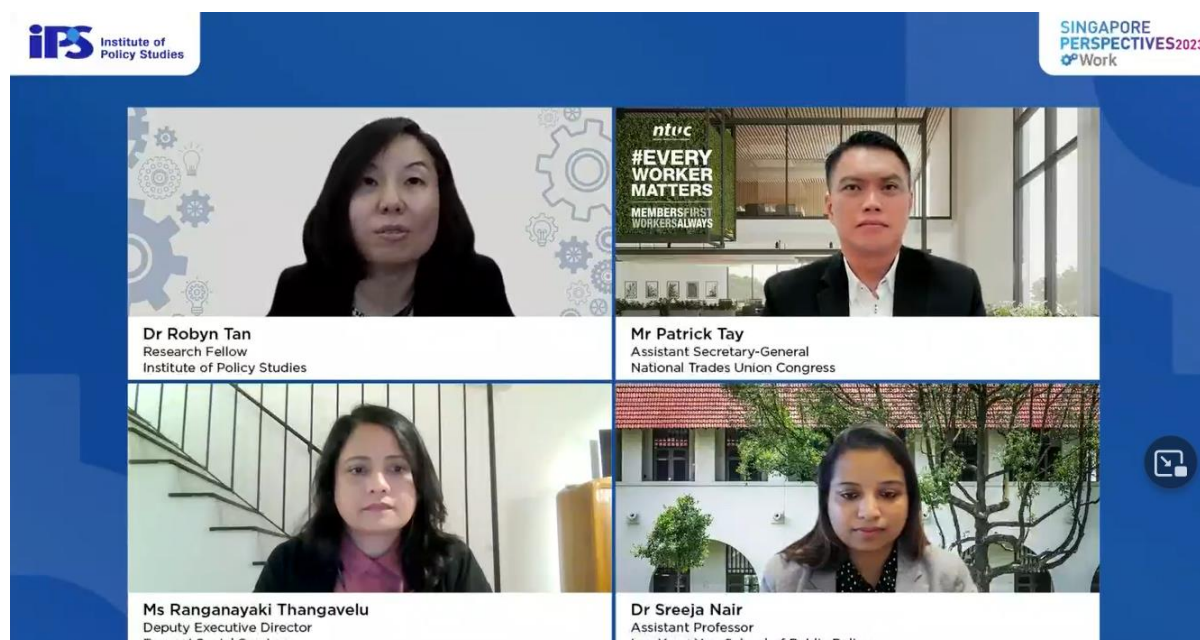


Singapore Perspectives 2023: Work Panel 6: Addressing Job Vulnerabilities: Ensuring Viable and Decent Work for All

By Thian Wen Li and Jeanne Tan

The Institute of Policy Studies' annual flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives, seeks each year to engage thinking Singaporeans in a lively debate on the country's policy challenges. The theme for this year was "Work", with discussions focusing on how disruptions and trends in technology, socio-economic developments and Singapore's demographics would shape the future of work.

In this forum, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Assistant Secretary-General Patrick Tay, Beyond Social Services Deputy Executive Director Ranganayaki Thangavelu, and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Assistant Professor Dr Sreeja Nair explored how government, the labour movement, social actors and employers can work together to overcome job insecurities and ensure that no one is left out even as enterprises remain competitive in the global economy. This session was moderated by Dr Robyn Tan, Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).



Caption for photo: NTUC Assistant Secretary-General Patrick Tay, Beyond Social Services Deputy Executive Director Ranganayaki Thangavelu, LKYSPP Assistant Professor Dr Sreeja Nair, in a discussion moderated by IPS Research Fellow Dr Robyn Tan.

Addressing Job vulnerabilities of mature PMEs

Mr Patrick Tay focused on the job vulnerabilities of mature PMEs (Professionals, Managers and Executives). Mature PMEs, or workers in their 40s to 60s, have become an increasingly vulnerable group that experience challenges in finding work and staying in employment. The PME taskforce, set up in October 2021, has made nine key recommendations following engagements with more than 10,000 PMEs, employers and stakeholders. A key recommendation relates to the provision of unemployment support for PMEs who have been displaced.

Based on a dipstick survey done in December 2020 with 3,500 PMEs, it was found that PMEs generally need protection against job losses and more support in employment and job-related training. In comparison with younger PMEs, mature PMEs seemed less confident about career opportunities due to their age. Mature PMEs reflected that they require support in compensation and benefits, job security, and progression, training and development.

Due to the large pool of foreign talent in the infocomm technology, professional services and financial services sectors, the existence of a level playing field is a concern for mature PMEs in these sectors. In the coming decades, Singapore will experience significant demographic shifts due to its ageing population. As a result, significant proportion of Singaporeans will fall into the category of mature PMEs. Therefore, it is imperative that mature PMEs are given greater assurance and assistance as the economy transforms.

Integrating Mid-Career Trainees' Experience With Skills Training Programmes and Policy Perspectives

Dr Sreeja shared about her study on trainee experience of skills training. To inform future iterations of skills training programmes in Singapore, her team conducted a study on the SGUnited Skills Programme (SGUS) to critically study skills training and potential trainee-to-skills mismatch.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SGUS was introduced in 2020 to support workers. It is a re-skilling and upskilling programme that offered six- to 12-month certifiable courses that focused on sectors of high labour demand or growth potential. It was offered progressively and in modular format. Not only was the course subsidised, there was also a monthly training allowance of \$1,200.

Mid-career trainees found that they lost the opportunity to practise the skills they acquired if they were not placed in a job immediately. Given the rapid transformation of the economy, they were also sceptical about training as it could quickly become obsolete. Those who were making a job transition after spending several years in a particular industry were not confident that a single training programme would be able to prepare them adequately. Mid-career trainees appreciated the flexibility of training programmes that were taught in a modular format, as well as the provision of training allowance.

While workers may have acquired new skills through training programmes, they are unable to demonstrate it to prospective employers. Therefore, in addition to training, networking remains an important factor in determining job outcomes.

Policymakers should consider three key factors when designing skills training programme. First, there is a complex relationship between skills training and enhanced career prospects. Therefore, a multi-stakeholder approach is necessary. Second, as certain profiles of workers require greater assistance and targeted support, there is a need to identify the challenges faced by trainees. Third, there should be greater focus on creating clear pathways as opposed to individual training programmes for trainees to make career transitions.

Collaboration, Cooperation, Inclusion: Challenges Faced by Low-Wage Workers

Ms Ranga cited research that less educated young workers are disadvantaged by both age and low education. The average earnings of those with ITE qualifications was found to be no different from those with secondary qualification or lower. They share similar job opportunities as those with little or no education qualifications, such as working as delivery riders. This segment of the population also faces relatively lower psychological well-being and poorer job conditions.

Low-wage workers experience vulnerabilities such as lower education, lower salaries, having to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet, less social capital, as well as lack of mental, emotional and physical space, which results in difficulty in committing to training. Employers are often unaware or struggle to accept these vulnerabilities.

These vulnerabilities result in various impacts. The psychological effects of these vulnerabilities include low self-image and hopelessness, particularly among youths. Physical impacts relate to insufficient food and sleep, which leads to poor health. Social impacts include reduced social participation, which leads to isolation.

It is thus important to nurture and include this segment of the population. Civil society and the community can support the tripartite model. Existing initiatives have been put in place to support low-wage workers. Government support include social protection through social insurance, social assistance, labour market programmes, and the Progressive Wage Model. Examples of contributions by employers and businesses include programmes rolled out by the Singapore Business Federation Foundation (SBFF), such as the Empower Circles Programme and the Employability Fund. Civil society initiatives can be seen through non-profits such as Workwell Leader, a collective of CEOs and leaders focused on championing workplace mental health and well-being as a strategic priority, Board Agenda, and Beyond Social Services, which offers three key programmes (i.e., Family Circles, Community Enablers and Community Fellows).

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: In this fast-changing economic environment, the skills landscape is evolving at a relentless rate. Reskilling, upskilling and lifelong learning may not be enough to enhance workers' employability and improve their career prospects, due to challenges in inequality and age-discrimination. How can different stakeholders work together for the "skills ecosystem" to enhance the employability and career prospects for workers?

A: Mr Tay said that the skills training system has evolved from one that is employer-supported to being individual-initiated. A key takeaway from research is the unequal training opportunities amongst workers. Those who are more proactive in learning are likely to exhibit high potential

and have a growth mindset. Employers are also more likely to fund training for these workers. Therefore, the labour movement is working closely with employers and tripartite partners to ensure that all workers will undergo skills training — no one should be left behind. Dr Sreeja said that more needs to be done to understand the support needed and vulnerabilities faced by workers who are not undergoing training. While the provision of programme is essential for skills training, workers must also be enticed to participate in these programmes. Ms Ranga added that employers must also be open to receiving mature and experienced workers who are able to bring in a different skillset. Furthermore, employers can provide career coaching within their organisation.

Q: How can the community be included in the existing tripartite system?

A: Ms Ranga shared her thoughts about the possibility of a “quartpartite” movement and how we should listen to the challenges from the voices of the people. Dr Sreeja added that several trainees in the SGUnited Skills programme revealed that their decision to participate in a particular course was a result of suggestions by friends and family members. Therefore, a community approach can have a positive effect in encouraging workers to undergo training or adopt a positive mindset towards lifelong learning. Mr Tay added that schools can also be a source of support. During the pandemic, students were unable to secure a job. In response, the labour movement mobilised various industries, sectors and companies to provide traineeship opportunities. Beyond the community, the labour movement is currently partnering with various stakeholders such as institutions of higher learning (IHLs), think tanks and social enterprises. Thus, the focus is on how these many helping hands can work together through a multiple-stakeholder approach to confront the various challenges.

Q: How can vulnerable workers participate equally in the engagement process? It is also common knowledge that workers facing vulnerabilities tend to be the hardest to reach and be excluded in the process. How can we develop the functional capabilities of workers so that they can participate fully and meaningfully in this engagement process?

A: Mr Tay shared how NTUC is reaching further and wider via various platforms from moving exhibitions and focus group discussions. Ms Ranga suggested bringing these conversations into the community. There are various charities that work on issues of employability, such as Daughters of Tomorrow. The Family Circles programme is another example, where those who want to contribute and participate attend more than a single sharing session where they talk about how they can be included in the workforce. Creating conversations for small-group sharing among different age groups and in different types of disadvantaged communities may be a possible approach. Additionally, low-wage workers may not be aware of existing policies and how they fit into their everyday lives.

Q: Unemployment support is one of the PME taskforce’s recommendations. Would that extend to some form of cash benefit for involuntarily retrenched workers? How would it look like and how does it differ for the PMEs and non-PMEs?

A: Mr Tay said that unemployment support has various considerations that need to be worked out. However, the key objective is to help those who have lost their job to re-enter the workforce with meaningful work. Unemployment support should be framed as a means to support and encourage those who are unemployed. In many parts of the world, this is called

active labour market policy, which seeks to incentivise those who are actively looking out to re-enter the workforce and not incentivise those who are not working.

Q: What is the success rate and what are the wages of workers who had gone through upskilling and training to pivot to a different industry?

A: Dr Sreeja said that success is defined differently and more research is needed into this area.

Q: What can be done such that the reliance on social networking factors becomes less of a factor in the recruitment process?

A: Ms Ranga said that social capital comes with social participation and inclusion. Therefore, one suggestion is to provide spaces in the community and workplace for people to contribute. Examples include the People's Association and community clubs. However, more needs to be done to encourage people to participate in the clubs and associations in their society, especially for low wage workers who lack time to do so. Employers can also work together with their community to create participation within their organisation.

Q: There are no anti-discrimination laws in Singapore. However, there is a sense that employers practise discrimination and they can justify why they are not re-employing a senior worker. What can be said about this?

A: Mr Tay said that workplace fairness and anti-discrimination is a key suggestion in the PME taskforce recommendations report. A tripartite committee on workplace fairness has been formed, comprising HR professionals and legal practitioners, etc. Currently, a Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) exists, which enforces a set of tripartite guidelines on fair employment practices. There are plans for a workplace fairness legislation akin to an anti-discrimination legislation. Nonetheless, majority of employers in Singapore are fair and responsible although instances of ageism and nationality discrimination occur from time to time. Ms Ranga added that employers should take the lead in having a diversity and inclusion officer in their workplace external from HR and ensure that complaints are heard.

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