

# Mid-career workers to get better support as Govt reviews lifelong education, but bosses must also help Chan Chun Sing

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- Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing said MOE will review how it funds and supports lifelong education
- This will give mid-career professionals a “boost to remain relevant and competitive”
- Mr Chan highlighted the need to help Singaporeans deal with the greater global competitive pressures they will face
- However, in order for lifelong learning to be successful, industry players must do their part by supporting it, he added

SINGAPORE — In a bid to give mid-career professionals a “boost to remain relevant and competitive”, the Ministry of Education (MOE) will review how it funds and supports lifelong education, Education Minister Chan Chun Sing said on Thursday (Jan 5).

Among other things, the review will look into how to counsel mid-career workers whose careers are “at risk”, as well as how to help mid-career learners offset the expense of lifelong learning, given the family and financial responsibilities they have.

Mr Chan said this during a keynote address at the start of the Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies. The annual event this round will have six online forums until Jan 9, followed by an in-person conference held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre in Marina Bay that will include a dialogue session with Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong.

Mr Chan's speech, which was live-streamed online and attended by around 750 viewers, touched on the challenges that Singapore faces in a world troubled and fragmented by geopolitics between major powers, and his vision for how the education system can remain “relevant to the times”.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Mr Chan said that the trends of digital connectivity and remote work, among other trends, make it clear that Singapore's education system has to evolve speedily.

That is why Singapore is investing heavily in exposing students to the larger world, sending them overseas and along “less trodden paths”.

“If our competitiveness comes from our ability to connect across geography, geopolitics and culture, then our education system must produce individuals and teams that can do these,” Mr Chan said.

Against such a backdrop, there is a need to define success “beyond the first 15 years in schools to also the next 50 years beyond schools”, he added.

Instead, lifelong learning matters more in the future of work. Given the disruptions expected, no amount of "front-loading" will be enough to prepare Singaporeans for life, he said.

"The spirit of inquiry, the desire to create new knowledge and value, the ability to discover, discern and distil — these are our new benchmarks of success."

### **WHAT THE REVIEW WILL ENTAIL**

- Mr Chan said that the review will address these aims:
- How to better guide and inform people of the challenges and opportunities ahead before they happen
- How to help adult learners defray the opportunity cost of continuing to learn as they juggle their family and financial responsibilities
- How to collectively help smoothen the more frequent transitions in and out of jobs, combined with the acquisition of new skills ahead of or in-between the transitions

Mr Chan did not provide a timeframe for the review or when it will be completed.

He said that the ideas to help mid-career workers arose from the ongoing Forward Singapore deliberations.

Forward Singapore is a year-long public consultation exercise launched by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong on June 28 last year. It will culminate in a report to be published around the middle of this year that will set out policy recommendations.

### **DON'T WAIT PASSIVELY FOR THE PERFECT WORKER**

In his speech, Mr Chan urged businesses to play a more active role in education, as well as to pay salaries that reward skills and contributions rather than credentials.

Aside from the attitudes of individual workers, there is also a need to relook at industry practices and institutional capabilities in order for lifelong learning to be successful.

"Industry cannot and must not wait passively for the 'perfect worker' to be developed for them," he said, calling on businesses to be an "active partner" in cultivating students' interest and building their skillsets before they enter the workforce.

To this end, corporate leaders are encouraged to join school advisory boards, support applied learning programmes and inspire the youth. Companies should also work with academia to keep training their workers even after they join the workforce.

"But the more we don't do this well and together as a system, the more we will end up poaching from one another in a stagnant talent pool," Mr Chan said.

Later in his speech, he also urged businesses to collectively narrow the remuneration gap between graduates and non-graduates, diploma holders and non-diploma holders, otherwise "no amount of preaching the multiple pathways of success will ever work".

He was repeating a point made by Mr Wong last year over the growing pay gap based on education levels.

Mr Chan said on Thursday that MOE does not believe that it alone can change society or develop the next generation.

"To truly embrace diversity of strengths and broaden our definition of success, we must work with parents, community partners and industries. Otherwise, what MOE preaches and practises will be undone," he added.

### **SHOULD PRESCHOOLS BE NATIONALISED?**

In a question and answer segment following his speech, Dr Paul Tambyah, the chairman of the Singapore Democratic Party, asked Mr Chan whether MOE would consider nationalising preschools.

Dr Tambyah added that the nationalisation of primary and secondary schools helped to unify society in the past and suggested that the same be done for early childhood education.

In response, Mr Chan said that there should not be a one-size-fits-all model for children in their early years.

"What we need is a diversity of models that cater to the diverse learning needs of our children at that young age," he said, adding that Dr Tambyah's suggestion of the nationalisation of preschools might result in a monolithic model that goes against the direction that Singapore wants to take.

Responding to a separate question by another audience member on the relevance of school examinations, Mr Chan said that such tests are not so much for the purposes of sorting people into different pathways, but should serve as self-evaluation for individual learners to understand their own strengths and weaknesses.

This would then allow the education system to apply the necessary resources to support the next phase of the individual's learning. "It is not so much to sort people according to different abilities and so forth," Mr Chan said.