

SPEECH BY MINISTER CHAN CHUN SING
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A FUTURE-READY LIFELONG LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

1. A very good afternoon to all of you. A pleasure to join you all here, at the inaugural Global Lifelong Learning Summit organised by SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) and the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL). I would like to thank our esteemed panellists and participants for contributing your views.

2. In the early years of Singapore's education system, we focused on enhancing the quality of the basic school system – across Primary and Secondary education.

a) To provide diverse pathways catering to different aspirations and learning needs, we then progressively strengthened our higher education system, comprising our Institute of Technical Education (ITE), Polytechnics and Universities.

b) By the 2010s, we started to invest much more in Early Childhood education, because we came to appreciate the importance of the foundational years in preparing one not just for school, but also for lifelong learning.

c) More recently, we have taken a life course approach to education, reframing our thinking from "MOE for Schools" to "MOE for Life".

i. Learning must continue throughout life.

3. And there are many good reasons for us to undertake this difficult yet essential task of lifelong education.

a) You have heard from SM Tharman yesterday – the pace of technological change, and the speed of business cycles have all increased. When combined, they significantly shorten the half-life of knowledge and skills.

b) Thus, no amount of frontloading in our school system will be adequate for the lifelong education needs of Singaporeans.

- c) We must keep reskilling and upskilling Singaporeans throughout their lives to help them remain competitive and relevant.
- d) Only so, can we better assure Singaporeans that they can contribute meaningfully throughout life – that they would be able to earn an adequate income to take care of themselves and their family, and most importantly, have a sense of purpose that they can contribute meaningfully according to their talents and hard work.

4. Just like in any society, while social transfers can help mitigate the challenges of keeping pace with the cost of living, it can never fully replace the sense of pride that one feels when one is able to take care of oneself, and also others.

- a) Neither can social transfers boost the self-confidence and respect that one desires.
- b) Only the knowledge that they are growing and contributing can help Singaporeans feel that they are independent and valued partners within our social fabric.

5. However, education alone will never be able to resolve the inequality of outcomes and insecurities that come with intensified global competition. On the other hand, not having access to lifelong education and training will certainly dim the prospects that anyone can break out of their own circumstances.

6. This is the case for individuals, as it is for countries.

- a) Many people used to talk about the "middle income trap", an economic phenomenon in which fast growing economies stagnate and are unable to move beyond middle income wages.
- b) Actually, it is not so much a "middle income trap", which suggests that beyond which, a country will achieve "escape velocity" and be freed from the forces that hold it back from achieving more. Recent research has shown that there is simply an "income trap" that can occur at any level of income and stage of societal development.
- c) Without constant improvements in skills and productivity, anyone and any country can be stuck at their current state, or even regress.

7. Therefore, in Singapore, we will spare no effort to upskill and reskill our people throughout their lives.

How to Build a Future-Ready Lifelong Learning Ecosystem

8. Having accepted that lifelong learning is crucial to one's confidence and competitiveness; and that it is also crucial to a company's competitiveness and a country's cohesion, the question is, how do we organise ourselves to give ourselves the best chance to get it done?

9. Today, I will lay out Singapore's six-prong approach to achieve this.

- a) First, helping our workers sense-make their skills needs and taking ownership of their skills journey
- b) Second, organising our system to better articulate and aggregate the demand for new skills and to activate the supply
- c) Third, leveraging technology for us to achieve retraining and upskilling at scale and at speed
- d) Fourth, deepening research into adult learning pedagogies, and elevating our Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) into a National Centre of Excellence for Adult Learning
- e) Fifth, upskilling and reskilling our training fraternity
- f) Sixth, tightening the nexus between frontier industry and academia

10. **First, we need to help our workers make sense of their future skills needs, and empower them to take ownership of their skills upgrading.**

- a) I look forward to the day when every Singaporean actively uses a "skills passport". This is not a far-fetched idea.
 - i. Currently, every Singaporean has access to the SkillsFuture Skills Passport that documents their skills, certificates and licences acquired throughout life. This helps them to track and identify potential skills gaps.
 - ii. In addition, the MySkillsFuture portal guides individuals to subscribe to courses they need to close the skills gaps for their next job.

- iii. With the foundational elements already in place, we intend to improve and scale such customised skills advisory for all Singaporeans.
 - iv. For example, SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) intends to build on the MySkillsFuture portal to develop a "journey planner" to signpost and curate courses from Institutes of Higher Learning and other training providers.
 - v. All these will inform individuals' decisions on lifelong learning and career planning.
- b) We will also be strengthening support for mid-career workers, especially those in their 40s and 50s who face greater risk of displacement or stagnation. This is one of the vulnerable populations that Senior Minister Tharman talked about in his opening speech.
- i. Mature workers are more vulnerable to retrenchment and long-term unemployment and require greater support to pivot to new job roles.
 - ii. To preserve their human capital and employability, we are looking at ways to reduce the high opportunity costs of training for these individuals given their family and financial commitments, and encourage them to participate in more substantive training that will support a skills reboot or career transition.
 - iii. For example, we are considering how we can further defray out-of-pocket training costs through further SkillsFuture Credit top-up.
 - iv. We are also studying good examples of other countries that provide training allowances to enable individuals to pursue longer full-time training that allows them faster re-entry into the job market.
 - v. Singapore has always had a strong focus on developing fresh graduates for the workforce so that we can stay competitive as an economy. What I have shared are the key steps that we will take so we invest in not just the first 15 years of an individual's life in school, but more importantly, the next 50 years of their life beyond school, so that everyone can take ownership of their skills upgrading and continue to grow throughout life.

11. Second, we must organise our system to better articulate and aggregate the demand for new skills, in order to activate the supply by the Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) and private training providers. A tighter integration

between demand and supply is key to our IHLs to become real Institutes of Continual Learning, and we will enable our training supply to respond more nimbly to the changes in business models and technology.

a) We acknowledge the challenges that businesses face in articulating the demand for new skills for their respective sectors, particularly SMEs, which forms the backbone of our economy and employ about 70% of our workforce.

i. SMEs are often caught up with the day-to-day demands of business operations and lack the time and resources to articulate their skills demand, and particularly, their future skills demand.

b) In Singapore, we are piloting different models where intermediaries will be formally appointed for their sector, and given the responsibility and resources to aggregate enterprise demand, activate training supply and facilitate the matching of jobseekers to job vacancies, especially among the more fragmented sectors. These intermediaries may be the trade associations, business chambers, institutes of continuous learning, the Labour Movement or even other new and innovative institutions.

12. Third, to understand the necessary emerging skills, and to scale reskilling and upskilling at speed, we will need to make better use of technology.

a) For example, SSG is already working with workforce analytics firms such as JobTech, JobKred, SalaryBoard, and LinkedIn to trawl the information on the internet, job boards, and talent portals to help identify new and emerging skills relevant for Singaporeans.

i. SSG publishes these insights on a regular basis to inform individuals of in-demand skills and jobs to guide decisions. We now also publish a yearly Skills Demand for the Future Economy report.

b) However, technology can further boost lifelong learning in many ways:

i. For busy adult learners with financial and familial commitments, we want them to be able to learn anytime, anywhere and at their own pace, with the better use of technology. These learners can then return to the

classroom for collaborative and creative activities that benefit from in-person interactions.

- ii. Technology also allows for adaptive learning. Training providers can collect and analyse learning data and real-time feedback to improve the design of curriculum and programmes. The shortened feedback loop allows training providers to more nimbly pilot new content in response to industry demand.
 - iii. And finally, very importantly, technology enables mass customisation. Online learning platforms bring together a variety of quality courses and modular programmes offered by top training institutions all around the world, catering to the diverse needs of learners.
- c) And with technology, we can even create content that suits the different needs of the learner. Technology combined with the "skills passport" and "journey planner", has the potential to change the way we learn and train at speed and at scale.
- i. Our conventional way of training 30,000 to 40,000 graduates from our education system each year will never be able to adequately meet the demand to reskill and upskill hundreds of thousands of workers per year, or 20%-30% of the workforce, assuming each worker needs to refresh his or her skills every 3 to 5 years.

13. Fourth, we must step up our investment in research into the pedagogy/andragogy of adult training.

- a) Adult learners are much more heterogeneous, compared to younger learners who generally fall within a 10-year age band:
 - i. There is a wide range of age, skills development needs and also varying educational qualifications, working experiences and skillsets among adult learners.
 - ii. Therefore, the pedagogy for teaching adult learners in their 20s, 40s and 60s will all be quite different.
- b) Beyond the National Institute of Education that develops educators for General Education, and the National Institute of Early Childhood Development that

trains early childhood educators, we have the Institute for Adult Learning for adult education.

- i. Singapore established the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) in 2008, initially as a training centre and qualifier for adult educators.
 - ii. Over time, it has developed expertise in research on andragogy, built links with enterprises, and more importantly, established a strong international network.
- c) We will increase our investment in the research into adult education pedagogies.
- i. **IAL will go beyond its primary role as a training centre, to become a National Centre of Excellence for Adult Learning (NCAL).**
 - ii. IAL will also spearhead the proliferation of new training pedagogies and technologies across training providers for adult education.
 - iii. As a national centre, it will corral the expertise and knowledge already built up in our local universities, polytechnics, and private institutions, build on the body of local and international research established in adjacent fields, work closely with the industry, and exchange views through international networks and fora like this Summit.
- d) I am glad to see IAL partnering our various universities to research into digital strategies in adult learning to strengthen our application of technology in our adult learning landscape.
- i. These strategies are firmly grounded in evidence-based innovative andragogies, and include learning analytics, augmented reality, and cyber-physical systems.
 - ii. For example, IAL, SSG and the Singapore University of Technology and Design have signed an MOU, with the aspiration to create a hybrid classroom where learners can toggle seamlessly between the physical and virtual classrooms to learn more effectively.
 - iii. We hope to involve more institutions and international partners in this conversation to experiment and push the boundaries for adult education in the near future.

14. Fifth, we have to raise the standards of adult education through regular upskilling and reskilling of the teaching fraternity. If we talk about lifelong learning, it must start from the education fraternity.

- a) As we strengthen our research into adult education, we must translate these new and fresh skills into our teaching fraternity's skillsets as well, and this must also be done at speed and at scale.
- b) Given the opportunity costs of training, adult learners have diverse needs and also higher expectations.
 - i. They are likely to be more critical than full-time students and want to learn things that are relevant and applicable to their work.
 - ii. Some may need more confidence-building and encouragement, having been out of the classroom for some time.
- c) The pedagogies used in teaching fresh school leavers cannot be applied wholesale to continuing education and training.
 - i. Training practices and pedagogies for adults have to evolve.
 - ii. Adult educators need to develop a good understanding of the digital medium and how to engage their diverse learners online and in the physical space.
 - iii. They also need to better tap and build on real-world and work experiences of adult learners.
- d) This is why I push for regular upgrading opportunities and industrial exchanges for our teaching fraternity. Otherwise, our teaching fraternity will lose credibility with the adult learners.

15. Finally, we must tighten the nexus between frontier business and industry knowledge with academia, and this must be a two-way process.

- a) Outdated knowledge of yesterday will not address tomorrow's challenges.
 - i. Industry plays an important role in ensuring that curriculum remains relevant and in sync with the evolving skills demands of the economy, to prepare our workforce and industries for tomorrow.
- e) Trainers need to be in touch with industry practice and needs by working with the industry, either part-time, or as a consultant for projects.

- i. In Singapore, we have emphasised this to the Institutes of Higher Learning, and encouraged them to ramp up industry attachments for their staff, to ensure the currency of their knowledge.
- f) On the other hand, having industrial practitioners work alongside our institutions' faculty will also help us to tighten this nexus.
 - i. We must broaden the schemes available for industry practitioners to be part of the teaching fraternity either as part-time faculty or as adjunct lecturers.
- g) The tighter the nexus between industry and academia, the greater the opportunity for us to translate our research and innovation outcomes into enterprise, and significantly shorten the knowledge cycle from frontier industry and business practices into academia.

Closing

16. So ladies and gentlemen, for us in Singapore, lifelong learning is not a "good to have". Lifelong learning is a necessity for us to develop confident individuals, a cohesive society, and a competitive country.

- a) We must **ensure that opportunities remain open to all and individuals, regardless of their background, can develop to their fullest potential throughout life.**
- b) This is also how we can continue to maintain the social mobility that we so cherish in Singapore; how we can strengthen the social compact with everyone regardless of their background, to prevent Singapore from being stratified across different income groups, across the skills gap and the knowledge gap.

17. Different players in our ecosystem – individuals, industries and institutions – will all have to work closely together, and we will need to develop new systems, intermediaries and portals to guide our people in order to achieve this. So while we all agree that lifelong learning is important, there is much more that we need to do to organise ourselves better in order to achieve the outcomes that we want.

a) We do not have all the ideas yet, and we will be happy to learn from our international partners and private industry providers, to see how we can collectively advance this agenda of ours.

18. Thank you very much.