

**OPENING ADDRESS BY MR NG CHER PONG, DEPUTY
SECRETARY (SKILLSFUTURE), MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF SKILLSFUTURE SINGAPORE AT THE
FOURTH PIAAC INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
21 NOVEMBER 2017, 6:30PM, RAFFLES CITY CONVENTION
CENTRE**

Mr Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, Special Advisor to the Secretary-General, OECD

Delegates of the PIAAC Board of Participating Countries

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

1 It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the fourth PIAAC International Conference, which is being held in Asia for the first time. We would like to thank OECD for giving us this honour to host the conference.

2 PIAAC, or the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, was launched in 2011 to assist governments in assessing, monitoring and analysing the level and distribution of skills among their adult population as well as the extent of skills use at work and in daily life. By focusing on literacy, numeracy and problem solving in a technology-rich environment, PIAAC has been enormously

successful in promoting the understanding of key adult competencies in these three domains.

IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH TO INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

3 For Singapore, the key findings allowed us to clearly identify how improvements made in our education and training system over the past 50 years paved the way for significant progress in skills attainment across different generations. This is best illustrated by the fact that Singapore made the greatest gains in average PIAAC scores between the older and younger cohorts. PIAAC has also been useful in helping us better understand key areas of national interest including skills use, occupational mismatch, participation in lifelong learning, and job quality. So, the snapshot provided by PIAAC of where we are is an important one.

4 But for Singapore, as a small open economy navigating in the global marketplace amidst an age of digital disruption, we have to continually up-skill and re-skill in order for our workforce to remain competitive and relevant. How we use the insights from PIAAC and draw on new empirical ground data to inform new ways of thinking and novel approaches for workforce development will be critical. This applies to various aspects of policy and practice.

5 Let me briefly share an example of this. Having a skilled workforce is clearly not enough to achieve growth and raise productivity. For individuals to thrive in the labour market, skills must be put to productive use at work. PIAAC provides insights into how frequently information-processing skills are used in the workplace. Not surprisingly, its

findings showed a relationship between reading skills used at work and labour productivity.

6 The shift in focus to skills utilisation also warrants the need to examine skills from the perspective of a business, for this is where the demand for skills arises. To uncover employers' understanding of skills and the link to business performance, the Institute for Adult Learning in Singapore, or IAL, began a national Business Performance Skills Survey. One of its key findings is that skills utilisation is closely associated with the pursuit of a high value added business strategy. Another finding is that technological changes in the work processes are associated with higher skills utilisation. This would suggest that innovation and technology adoption were more likely to occur in a high skills environment, and that technological changes should be accompanied by a close evaluation of associated changes in skills demands and needs. The Business Performance Skills Survey has attracted a lot of attention amongst the design teams of two international skills survey – one being the 2018 European Company Survey, under the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. The other is the Employers' Module of the PIAAC second cycle.

7 Beyond IAL, other local institutions have started seeking research collaborations to support a deepening of the understanding of skills. I am particularly happy to mention that earlier this year, IAL signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, LinkedIn Singapore Pte Ltd, National Trades Union Congress, and Microsoft Operations Pte Ltd, to forge a framework of collaboration to investigate the gaps between skills and jobs, and other related issues.

SINGAPORE'S COMMITMENT TO RESEARCH

8 To encourage such inter-disciplinary research in skills, employment and training, we have set up a national-level Workforce Development Applied Research Fund of \$20 million. Administered by SkillsFuture Singapore, the fund recognises the importance of co-creation, and tapping on the expertise and experience of the broader research community. We therefore accept research proposals from local-international partnerships.

CONCLUSION

9 The hosting of the PIAAC Conference is timely and plugs Singapore into the international research scene on workforce development. With the line-up of 5 speakers and 10 paper presentations on various topics, this fourth PIAAC Conference promises insights in economic, education, employment and social policy issues. These issues are aptly represented in the topics of our keynotes and parallel sessions, such as adult learning systems, gender gaps, financial skills, job quality, digital literacy, non-cognitive skills, as well as how skills are linked to economic outcomes.

10 With over half of the delegates being from overseas and more than 30 countries with us here, I encourage the delegates to make the most of this opportunity to actively exchange ideas, as well as to build new relationships as we deal with common challenges faced globally on skills and workforce development.

11 I hope the meeting of minds over the next two days will spark new ideas and usher in new collaborations of mutual interest. For our international delegates, I also

hope that you will be able to find some time to soak in the sights and experience of Singapore.

12 On this note, I wish all of you a fruitful conference. Thank you.