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This is the final primer in a series of 12 on various current affairs issues, published in the run-up to The Straits Times-Ministry of Education National Current Affairs Quiz.

PRIMER

Going beyond the paper chase

In the last decade, undergraduate numbers have doubled, leading to an oversupply of graduates whose academic skills do not meet real needs in the job market. PHOTO: REUTERS

By AMELIA TENG

AROUND the world, young people are yearning to earn a university degree after they leave school.

Many have the mistaken notion that a degree is the passport to securing a good job and hence, a comfortable life.

That may have been true in the past, but as the world grapples with an increasingly technology-driven economy, governments have realised that it is no longer paper qualifications that will get young people jobs, but rather, "deep skills", which refer to having specialised practical expertise, or being really good in areas that are in high demand.

Policymakers are looking for ways to attract young people to focus on job-relevant skills instead of going for general garden-variety degrees.

In the last decade, undergraduate numbers have doubled, leading to an oversupply of graduates whose academic skills do not meet real needs in the job market.

Economists have warned against a graduate glut, which is being seen in societies such as South Korea and Taiwan, which have "over-educated and under-employed" people.

In Singapore, degree holders, among all qualification groups, have in the last two years found themselves the most vulnerable to losing their jobs.

The problems are similar worldwide: Many prefer academic education to a vocational path as they think it will pay off and few want to get their hands dirty. So essential jobs in sectors such as transport, manufacturing, health care and retail that keep the economy turning remain unfilled.

What many young people do not realise is that they may be better off having expertise in specialised fields through "intensive internships", where they pick up skills that employers want and apply what they learn through solving problems on the job.

One of the proven ways of acquiring these skills is the famed German apprenticeship, which many economists say is the reason the country has managed to keep youth unemployment at bay during the recession.

Its youth unemployment rate is the lowest in Europe, at 7.6 per cent last year, compared with almost 24 per cent across the European Union and more than 50 per cent in countries such as Greece and Spain.

Their apprenticeship system is a relic of ancient guilds, in which master craftsmen trained young people, passing on trade knowledge and skills to them.

In modern apprenticeships or traineeships, which last from one to four years, students as young as 15 typically spend one or two days a week in a vocational school and the rest at a company, where they are paid.

These span trades from construction and engineering to nursing, hospitality and early childhood education.

An apprenticeship is also the key route into the German workforce – about 60 per cent of each cohort choose the vocational path while being schooled.

German firms also play a key role – they see it as part of their responsibility to train and educate the young – and they invest millions of euros to train students each year, believing that it is money well spent for the future.

Many also devote an entire department of staff to come up with training and career development programmes for students, and work with local colleges to develop their curricula.

The result is that students emerge from the system with both practical and technical skills, and a good overall understanding of the industry and profession they are entering. Apprentices also tend to be more loyal to the company they work with.

Recognising the growing need to equip young people with skills that are in tune with industry demands, the authorities in the United States, Britain and Hong Kong are revamping vocational education and turning to apprenticeships as part of the solution.

Singapore is doing likewise, through a review committee that is looking at fine-tuning its post-secondary and tertiary education system through improving training and career paths for polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education students.

The United States, where formal programmes combining on-the-job learning with mentorship and classroom teaching fell 40 per cent between 2003 and last year, has expanded apprenticeship opportunities through increased funding.

In Australia, the number of apprentices and trainees in training last year was 392,200, a decrease of 12.9 per cent from the year before.

Its government has ramped up efforts across the different states to improve vocational training in schools by offering financial incentives to employers and apprentices and setting up organisations which help arrange training.

New Zealand has drawn up vocational pathways for students to to improve the link between education and employment. It has even offered free vocational courses to students as young as 16 in areas such as hairdressing, carpentry, tourism and automotive engineering.

Hong Kong, which faces a labour crunch with many jobs in industries such as construction waiting to be filled, is starting a new pilot scheme called "Earn and Learn" in September that combines vocational schooling and on-the-job training.

But the success of all these programmes really depends on how much society values technical skills, and that takes more than just a training scheme.

It takes a much closer relationship between those who train students and those who employ them, so that graduates will see the connection between the classroom and the workplace.

Students must be persuaded to see that it is more vital to have deep skills and be strong in an area that they are interested in rather than chase academic degrees for the sake of being more "qualified".

Employers, including the Government and its agencies, need to relook their hiring processes. They need to recognise the value of practical skills and experience over credentials and grades, and pay and promote people according to how well they do their job.

Firms must dare to take in students and train them, and perhaps the Government can help to shoulder the cost of training through subsidies and incentives.

And as the biggest employer here, the Government should take the lead to foster this spirit of developing talent and skills in young people.

Only then will students be convinced that paper qualifications are not the only way to a better career and life.

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THE STRAITS TIMES
Ministry of Education
NATIONAL CURRENT AFFAIRS QUIZ

ABOUT THE BIG QUIZ

THIS primer is part of The Straits Times' initiative to discuss issues of national concern. Each Monday, the paper's correspondents will address burning questions in the Opinion section, offering unique Singapore perspectives on complex issues.

The primers, as well as four campus talks helmed by senior editors and correspondents, are part of this paper's outreach programme called The Straits Times-Ministry of Education National Current Affairs Quiz, nicknamed The Big Quiz.

The nationwide event, whose presenting sponsor is the Singapore Press Holdings Foundation, aims to promote the understanding of civics among pre-university students. It is open to all first year pre-university and Year 5 Integrated Programme students from 25 participating schools.

Teams from Innova Junior College and Jurong Junior College won the first two of four quiz rounds held this year.

The upcoming talks by ST journalists and the quiz rounds that follow will be held on:

- July 30 at Hwa Chong Institution
- Aug 6 at Dunman High School

For more information, go to www.straitstimes.com/thebigquiz

SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVE

Working to get more companies involved in student training

DESPITE having one of the world's lowest youth unemployment rate at 6.7 per cent, Singapore is taking a pre-emptive approach and relooking its vocational education for polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) students through a national review.

Recommendations will be released later this year.

Germany and Switzerland, along with Australia and New Zealand, were countries that the Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review (Aspire) committee visited earlier this year.

Senior Minister of State for Law and Education Indranee Rajah, who chairs the committee, had earlier raised the possibility of longer internships and more structured work stints with employers being more involved in students' training.

Polytechnic and ITE students now complete work attachments that range from one to six months during their course of study.

Unlike in Germany and Switzerland, where firms see it as natural and integral to train and educate the young, the duty of passing on work skills to students here is left mostly to educational institutions.

Small and medium-sized enterprises – which make up 99 per cent of enterprises here – are also less receptive to student-apprentices as they grapple with resource constraints and may not be as well equipped to train young people.

Many, including Forum letter writers who have written to The Straits Times, have called for the Government to offer firms incentives to take on apprentices.

Part of the problem, school officials say, may stem from the widely held view in Singapore that young people should stay in school and then get a job later.

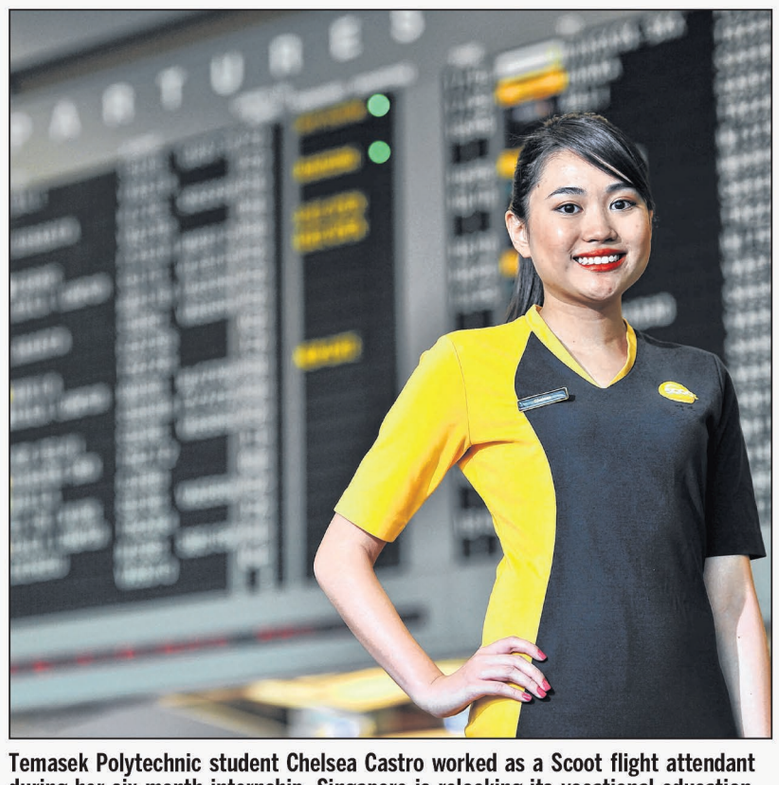
Most students are more used to the "classroom-studying mode" as opposed to the apprenticeship model, where learning is more hands-on.

A traineeship scheme run by the ITE, for instance, has dipped in popularity, with about 600 students in its annual intake, down from 1,000 trainees annually about five to six years ago.

There is also an entrenched stigma attached to technical skills and workers amid rising aspirations of young Singaporeans for a university degree, often seen as the only and easiest pathway to success.

But as Singapore grows its pool of university graduates, it is just as important that education equips young people with the right skills to match the economy's needs.

AMELIA TENG



Temasek Polytechnic student Chelsea Castro worked as a Scoot flight attendant during her six-month internship. Singapore is relooking its vocational education through a national review. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

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