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.

Go beyond the paper chase

By AMELIA TENG

A Round the world, young people are being encouraged to learn skills that they have never heard of before.

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

But what has been true in the past, is not the way that’s going to work in the future. Work and skills are constantly evolving, which means that the vocational skills that young people have today might very well be outdated before they graduate.

Skills need to be up to date. And that’s why the education system needs to be more dynamic.

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 of the risk of unemployment because of excess supply of graduates being sent to cities such as Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, which have more-educated and under-employed workers.

In Singapore, degree holders, among other professions, have in the last two years found themselves in the middle of the job market as they are losing their jobs.

The problems are similar worldwide: Many graduate academic educations to a vocational path they never expected to find themselves in.

Working to get more companies involved in student training

DESPITE having one of the world’s lowest unemployment rates at 0.7 per cent, Singapore is taking a pre-emptive approach and revolving its vocational education for polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) students through a national review.

Recommendations will be in place after this year.

Germany and Switzerland, along with Australia and New Zealand, are countries that the Singapore government is looking to for inspiration.

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

In Switzerland, manufacturers and architects, where firms see it as natural to have people work for them in their company, from the age of 8 to 17, give apprenticeship education.

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 end up with both practical and technical skills, and a good understanding of what employers are looking for.

Apprentices also tend to be more loyal to the company that they work with.

Receiving 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 have been encouraging their employers to hire apprentices and training in the form of on-the-job training and leaving apprenticeships as part of the solution.

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

The United States, where formal programmes combine work-performance with mentorship and classroom learning, has expanded its apprenticeship training for over the last 10 years.

In Australia, the number of apprentices and trainees in training last year was 592,200, a decrease of 12.7 per cent from the year before.

The government has ramped up efforts to improve vocational training in schools by offering financial incentives to vocational education institutions and setting up organizations which help emerging training.

New Zealand has drawn up national policies for students to improve the link between education and employers.

It is evident from these examples that the government can help to boost 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 on-the-job learning and train workers.

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

AMELIA TENG