OBSTACLE 2: ‘Frontloading’ education before joining workforce

By LIM VAN LIANG

LEARN-AS-YOU-WORK programmes are all well and good to boost employability, but it is an uphill task to alter people’s entrenched mindset of “frontloading” education in order to get them to join the workforce earlier.

The successful polytechnic or Institute of Technical Education graduate who has held off getting a degree is still a rarity, going by the young people and bosses Insight spoke to.

Some responsibility for this lies with employers’ human resource practices, which do not reflect a belief that there are purported rewards to be reaped from well-trained workers later. For their part, students say they need proof that workplace training eventually gets them better-paying jobs.

Take student Lim Rui Shan, doing a diploma course in chemical engineering at Temasek Polytechnic. The 22-year-old failed her A levels and spent a year working and studying to be an accountant before scrapping that and resuming full-time studies. She plans to get a degree from a public university here after obtaining her diploma, and then work in the petrochemical sector.

She is sticking to this even after learning that leading petrochem companies fully sponsor degree courses for diploma-holding technicians who have done well and that the qualification could lead to an engineer position.

Ms Lim attended a Jurong Island Open Day earlier this month, and says: “The presenter had obtained his part-time degree, and when I asked if he was going to be promoted to an engineer next, he said ‘no’, because he has to compete with degree holders, and engineer positions seldom open up. He said people in the industry know that it’s a part-time degree just by looking at the course name.”

Until diploma holders in the job market can achieve wages approaching parity with degree holders, this will continue to be the case, he maintains. “Right now, the job market is just friendlier to people with degrees.”

Hers is not an atypical path: Ministry of Education statistics show that while 20 per cent of each polytechnic cohort secure a place at one of the six local universities, a larger number (24.5 per cent) go on to obtain a degree qualification elsewhere.

With nearly half the polytechnic cohort pursuing degrees, it seems the Aspire committee has its work cut out in urging young people to treat education as a lifelong marathon rather than a 20- or 30-year sprint in their youth. This is despite the irrefutable logic behind the push: You risk job obsolescence from technological and global economic shifts.

But as the likes of Ms Lim highlight, a big question is: Will employers come on board in providing wage parity once young people have completed continuing education programmes?

Indeed, Senior Minister of State Indranee Rajah said during the press conference announcing the Government’s acceptance of Aspire’s recommendations: “We need employers and companies to come in, (as) support from them is important.”

“Employers must have the right mindset, and our system must be able to support this.”

However, the Government has levers it can pull beyond simple exhortations. Companies here who have become more open to place-and-train and other upskilling schemes since the foreign worker dependency ratio was tightened in 2012, while training allowances to offset workers’ lower productivity during training helped seal the deal.

Mr Richard Leo, managing director of freight-moving company Astro Express Logistics, says: “The labour market became very tight because of the cap on foreign workers. The Government is helping us in terms of value-add, and it’s helping us to retain staff and train them.”

Three of his employees – all fresh polytechnic and ITE graduates on a place-and-train programme, which they joined a year ago – are still with the firm, no small feat in a sector where workers typically leave after about six months. They were matched up by the Employment and Employability Institute (e2i), which has helped some 5,000 Singaporeans gain employment across 90 job types since 2011. Its place-and-train programme was started in 2008.

But beyond what can be seen as beefed-up induction and immersion programmes for fresh hires, employees themselves can be resistant to upgrading, especially when it requires a huge time and monetary commitment.

Using the same workers as an example, Mr Leo says he encouraged two to take up a degree scholarship offered by the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore. But even with his support, they were both hesitant to take up “an offer that’s too good to refuse”, he says.

A big reason for this is the stamina needed to work and study at the same time. A part-time course means they would take three to five years to get their degrees. Other perceived “strings” include a one-year bond and co-payment by the employee himself.

“We can’t afford to have them studying full-time because we need bodies to run the business,” says Mr Leo, of his 20-man firm.

“What holds them back is the commitment; working and studying is quite daunting.”

Experts like SIM Global Education’s academic division director, Mr Timothy Chan, says all parties in the equation need to adjust their mindset and be willing to sacrifice short-term productivity for long-term gains.

“We need to be more innovative in approaching training, (and) try to fully integrate the training programmes with work,” he says. yanliang@sp.edu.com.sg