Aspiring to overcome manpower challenges

BY LESLIE LOH

APPLAUD our government for endorsing the recommendations of the Aspire committee to make lifelong learning a way of life in Singapore. These breakthrough recommendations could overcome our manpower challenges while optimising the potential of everyone.

In the past, graduating from an educational institution marked the point where education stopped and work began. Now, education and work are intertwined. Employers used to take generalists and train them into specialists for their job role or industry. However, fewer employers now want to do that or can afford to do so in a globally competitive economy, especially when they are too small to conduct such training given their limited scale and resources. To meet these needs, education institutions have to deliver not just theoretical knowledge but practical, industry relevant skills for “plug-and-play” readiness in the work place.

In her closing speech at the Parliamentary debate on Aspire (Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review) on 9 September 2014, Indranee Rajah, Senior Minister of State for Education and Law, emphasised that Aspire is part of a bigger, holistic and strategic move by the government to align education with the industry. Applied learning has been introduced at the primary and secondary stage to complement already strong academic foundations. Individuals can pursue applied degree pathways offered by the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (UniSIM). Even academic universities will have applied learning elements as they proceed to strengthen their internship programmes. Applied learning will be further deepened in the polytechnics and ITE. There will be a whole spectrum of applied education components providing multiple pathways for individuals to acquire industry relevant skills before they join the workforce.

Recognising the growing demand for applied learning and lifelong learning, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam announced a new Continuing Education and Training (CET) Master Plan to further develop the depth and breadth of our relatively young CET sector. The WSQ framework will be expanded across sectors to underpin the development of skills progression pathways, for both fresh graduates and adult workers. Manpower and training support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) will also be enhanced. There will also be more structured workplace-based learning through Place-and-Train programmes, and more online learning resources to make learning flexible and mobile.

Aspire has received strong support and endorsement from both private and public sectors since it was unveiled although some have expressed concerns about the significant challenges our government will face to bring on board support from diverse stakeholders involved, including individuals, parents, employers, industry associations, education institutions, unions and regulatory agencies.

An expanded CET Sector can play a critical role in alliance with our government to bring on board the various stakeholders for Aspire’s recommendations to succeed. The government can cultivate a conducive environment for various stakeholders to come together while our CET providers can serve as the bridge upon which the stakeholders can deliver a seamless pathway to the industry for our learners.

Our CET providers are poised to collaborate with major stakeholders, including employers, individuals, institutes of higher learning, and the government. CET providers can be the matchmakers between individuals and employers by delivering training, which plugs competency gaps and also by facilitating job placements that meet the career aspirations of individuals. They can serve as the industry’s bridges and linkages for our IHLs to deliver applied learning in a coordinated fashion. CET providers can also act as outreach channels to support the implementation of the various support programmes. With those, CET providers play the role of lifelong career and training partner for individuals and also outsource talent and training provision for employers.

The best of both worlds

With the significant majority of polytechnics and ITE students preferring to pursue full-time academic degrees first before joining the workforce, CET providers can deliver the best of both worlds by allowing them to join the workforce earlier without the need to forego their aspirations for a degree. CET providers can deliver “Place & Train” programmes for these learners to acquire practical work experience while undergoing competency-based training that lead to industry recognised qualifications. CET providers can establish accreditation pathways for acquired qualifications, enabling learners to receive transfer credits towards additional qualifications, including internationally recognised degrees and industry certifications as they progress in their careers.

Most of our SME employers, which hire 70 per cent of our workforce, will not be ready to adopt Aspire’s recommendations given their limited scale to efficiently deliver the required training for their employees. CET providers can be the SME’s outsource talent and training partners to develop and implement competency frameworks, facilitate talent sourcing, and deliver industry-relevant training. CET providers can also adopt innovative learning technologies and pedagogy that facilitate learning anytime and anywhere. That will help overcome SME employers’ inability to send their employees for training given their limited resource pool.

The new CET master plan will help transform our CET sector so it can provide the necessary support infrastructure by which applied learning and lifelong learning can flourish.

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