

SPEECH BY MR NG CHER PONG, CHIEF EXECUTIVE FOR THE SINGAPORE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AGENCY, AT THE OPENING OF THE 9TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RESEARCHING WORK AND LEARNING, ON WEDNESDAY

Members of the International Advisory Committee for Researching Work and Learning Conference

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

1 I am pleased to be here with you this morning at the 9th International Conference on Researching Work and Learning, or RWL9 in short. The RWL series brings together researchers from all over the globe to discuss new ideas and approaches in the field of work and learning. It is very timely for the Institute for Adult Learning, or IAL, to be hosting this edition of the conference because in Singapore, we are seeking to strengthen the nexus between work and learning, as part of efforts to foster a culture of skills mastery and lifelong learning. We call these national efforts, the SkillsFuture movement. Through RWL9, we hope to directly engage in extensive discussions on this important issue of putting what has been learnt into use at workplaces and enabling continuous learning at workplaces. Almost half of delegates today are from overseas, coming from more than 20 countries across all the continents. So, we look forward to lively and engaging discussions.

GLOBALISATION AND CHALLENGES TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

2 Indeed, the theme of today's conference, *Work and Learning in the Era of Globalisation: Challenges for the 21st Century*, goes to the very heart of the challenges confronting policy-makers and educators in workforce development, whether at the K-12 or vocational levels. In an era associated with higher economic volatility, changing labour market arrangements and rapid technological changes, the very nature of jobs is changing. Technological developments in automation and data analytics are creating new employment in high-skilled and services occupations, while also making other jobs, including many mid-level, mid-skilled jobs, obsolete. In fact, one study in the US asserts that "The half-life of a learned skill is 5-years". This means that half of what you learned 5 years ago is irrelevant and much of what you learned 10 years ago is completely obsolete. While this may be true, there is also research about how skills can be recontextualised into new settings. This puts a more optimistic and nuanced perspective to the issue, and we should explore how we can help workers adapt his or her skills to new settings and work requirements.

3 The new global environment is characterised by risks, but also opportunities. Governments, vocation educational and training, or VET, systems and VET practitioners worldwide are tackling this set of realities in their own respective national contexts that come with many tensions, contradictions, and no simple solution. In the UK, for example, a key focus is to increase the employability of younger workers. To do so, new and rejuvenated forms of apprenticeship programmes have been rolled out. These programmes have varying levels of success, usually linked to specific industry and organisational contexts. Korea, on

the other hand, is concerned about widespread graduate unemployment and under-employment, because a very high proportion of each cohort is entering the labour market with university degrees. To counter this trend, Korea has set up about 50 Meister schools¹ in collaboration with industry, in order to create attractive VET pathways as an alternative to traditional academic pathways.

4 In Singapore, promoting skills mastery is similarly high on the policy agenda. As a small open economy in a rising Asia, we must equip our workforce with the skills to compete in the global marketplace. This will have to be a continuous process as the global economy restructures, and as new jobs and skills emerge. Our approach towards workforce development is evolving in three broad ways.

5 First, we are moving away from a narrow concept of what we term as Continuing Education and Training, or CET. CET will not only be about equipping a worker with the skills for his or her current job, but also to support him or her in the journey to develop deep expertise and skills mastery. We recognise this as being vital to enable every Singaporean to maximise his or her potential. This entails making available meaningful work opportunities and skills-based career progression pathways, by collaborating with industries, employers and unions to design jobs that offer high performance working environments. It also involves providing better support to workers to make well-informed choices in education, training and careers.

6 Second, we are blurring the distinction between Pre-Employment Training and CET. Learning should be a continuous journey, and should take place at the most appropriate learning locations – whether in educational institutions or at workplaces.

¹ <http://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/revamped-vocational-education-may-have-prevented-graduate-glut-ex-korean-minister>

We are therefore moving away from simple didactic approaches in education and training that are delivered mainly in the classrooms, to embrace wider types of learning. Hence, we are re-focusing on the workplace as one of the key spaces for learning, alongside with the use of technologies for more intentional and effective learning. IAL has introduced a programme known as Learning@Work Boot Camp. This is an enterprise partnership cum work-based certification programme where CET practitioners work directly with companies to design and implement targeted workplace learning initiatives to address performance issues or enhance productivity. A total of 10 companies are involved in the pilot phase. The initial findings are positive, in that enterprises found the business-centric approach offered through the Learning@Work Boot Camp practical, more relevant and timely. However, there were also challenges such as with securing the support of workplace supervisors, encouraging learners to take ownership of implementation efforts and adjusting to new ways of doing things as we integrate learning with work. IAL is therefore taking some immediate steps to address the feedback. These include launching the Learning@Work website to enable organisations and their staff to get a pulse check on their workplace learning readiness. The website also provides online resources on workplace learning methods for adoption by organisations to implement learning more deliberately, with a view to improving the performance at work. At the same time, we are strengthening the capabilities of CET practitioners to develop new and innovative approaches and pedagogy, particularly in the use of technology to facilitate learning. IAL will present these initial findings at one of the parallel sessions, and we welcome your feedback to help us strengthen the programme for a more sustained roll-out, especially to our small-and-medium-sized companies.

7 Third, we are broadening our own national competency framework, the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications System. First introduced in 2005, the framework has played an important role in standardising provision and making access to certification available across the workforce. But we can do more, and we will expand the system into a truly national skills framework. We are working on this in partnership with industries as well as both public institutes of higher learning and private training providers. Unlike in Europe, we do not have an established tradition amongst our employers of collaborating with one another to develop industry skills frameworks. However, what we do have is a strong culture of tripartite partnership across industry, unions and government agencies. We will tap on the tripartite partnership to develop Sectoral Manpower Plans for each key sector, and each such plan will contain the skills framework necessary to support its implementation.

8 We do all these under a national movement called SkillsFuture involving industries, government agencies, unions and educational institutions. This movement is being steered by the SkillsFuture Council, helmed by Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam. In this year's Budget, the Government announced that its spending on CET will increase from about S\$600 million per year over the last five years, to an average of over S\$1 billion per year from now to 2020.² This signals Singapore's strong commitment to build a high skills and high productivity system to benefit workers, industries and the wider society.

ROBUST RESEARCH IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TO INFORM POLICY

9 As SkillsFuture will require us to break new ground and enter uncharted territories, we will concurrently step up research efforts in workforce development

² Budget 2015, p. C8. Available at http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2015/pc.aspx#s1

and lifelong learning, to better inform us of the types of interventions we need and their effectiveness. Workforce development policies, strategies and practices that we are piloting will be validated and affirmed by data and findings from robust research. By building on literature from previously-conducted research and drawing from new empirical ground data, the systematic process of critical inquiry will enable us to generate high quality and reliable evidence to inform new ways of thinking and novel approaches for workforce development in the various aspects of policies and practices.

10 The IAL is one of the leading local players in CET research. Set up in 2008 with the dual mission of professionalising the CET sector, and catalysing applied research in adult education, it has been developing local capabilities and tapping on the expertise of researchers worldwide. Professor Johnny Sung from the UK and Dr Helen Bound from Australia are among the pioneers who have joined us in this journey. Johnny began a national benchmark study on the level of skills utilisation in Singapore based on individuals' understanding of their own competencies, and his team will soon launch a new national benchmark study to understand employers' understanding of skills and the link to business performance. Helen recently led the IAL research team to undertake a first-of-its-kind comprehensive study of the learning and development of non-permanent workers in Singapore. The study yielded novel insights, in particular, the "permanent work" paradigm that may have influenced the design of workforce programmes and initiatives even when they are purported to benefit freelancers and similar individuals. We are now studying the findings and deliberating on more effective ways to support the learning and development of these non-permanent workers in our workforce.

11 In addition, IAL has developed a network of research collaborations including Visiting Fellowship programmes that tap on the expertise of esteemed researchers. These include Professor Stephen Billet from Griffith University, Professor Karen Evans from the UCL Institute of Education, Professor Phil Brown from Cardiff University, Professor David Boud from University of Technology Sydney, and Associate Professor Peter Rushbrook from RMIT University, all of whom are helping us better understand the situation of work and learning in Singapore. In fact, IAL is launching a new book on this topic entitled “Towards a New Understanding of Workplace Learning: the Context of Singapore”, which is edited by Dr Helen Bound and Associate Professor Peter Rushbrook with contributions from 10 contributors from Singapore, Europe and Australia.

12 Beyond IAL, other local players such as the Nanyang Technological University and SIM University are also launching research programmes to deepen the understanding of work and lifelong learning. These developments reflect a growing emphasis on CET research locally. I am particularly happy to announce that IAL and SIM University will be signing a Memorandum of Understanding later today to forge a partnership in research on workforce development and lifelong learning. Besides potential research programmes in learning analytics and pedagogical practices, both institutions will also explore ways to strengthen the capabilities of our educators and researchers, including through exchange programmes and by convening expert roundtables.

SUSTAINING COLLABORATIONS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

13 Indeed, the hosting of the RWL9 conference plugs Singapore into the international research scene on work and learning. It provides us the opportunity to update ourselves on the latest thinking in this area, and to expand our network of experts for future collaboration. With 167 paper and poster presentations from more than 20 countries, the RWL9 programme line-up promises to offer an insightful and enriching experience for all delegates. No single research study has much meaning in isolation. Each study is a piece that fits with other pieces to create a complex mosaic of academic literature. I encourage the delegates today, including our local CET community, to make the most of this opportunity to actively exchanges ideas on the issue of work and learning, as well as to build new and stronger relationships.

CONCLUSION

14 I hope the meeting of minds over the three 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 of Singapore, amidst the hustle and bustle of the conference,

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