

# experience SINGAPORE

ISSUE 81

## Lifelong Learning: Staying Ahead in a Changing World

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MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
SINGAPORE

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The Experience Singapore is a publication of the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The newsletter aims to share more on the Singapore Cooperation Programme, a technical assistance outreach programme administered by MFA, and other key issues in Singapore's foreign policy.

# Editor's Note



Dear readers,

People are often cited as the most valuable resource in Singapore – a small city-state without a hinterland and natural resources. It is little wonder why education and vocational training are key features of Singapore's policies since independence, to develop and build a resilient and modern workforce.

Recent shifts in geopolitics, rapid technological advancements and ongoing economic transformation have drastically changed the labour market. Skills that are relevant today may become obsolete just five years down the road. "Front-loading" education during one's schooling years is no longer enough.

Recognising this, the Singapore Government launched the SkillsFuture initiative in 2015 to promote lifelong learning. This was further backed by the Forward Singapore (Forward SG) exercise in 2022, which outlined policy and mindset shifts towards reskilling and upskilling. You can learn more about SkillsFuture and ForwardSG in this issue's cover story (pages 3 to 5).

To support this transition, tripartite partners such as the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) are playing their part to help workers and employers adapt. As NTUC Assistant Secretary-General Mr Patrick Tay shares on pages 6 and 7, NTUC has rolled out targeted initiatives to address and alleviate workers' and employers' concerns when it comes to upskilling.

Our efforts in human resource development extends beyond our shores. We believe that when we grow together as a region, we enhance ASEAN's stability, competitiveness and prosperity. A hallmark of our capacity-building efforts is the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP), where over half of the participants come from ASEAN member states. Director-General of the Technical Cooperation Directorate, Ms Jolene Tan, shares more insights about the SCP on pages 8 to 10.

Today, the SCP and the Singapore Cooperation Centres (SCCs) have contributed to the lifelong learning journeys of many participants. On pages 11 and 12, three senior foreign officials share their personal experiences with SCP courses at the SCCs.

In today's rapidly evolving environment, it is important that we keep apace by continuously learning and adapting to seize the opportunities that await us.

*Yuen Siu Hong*


**2nd Director-General  
Strategic Communications Directorate  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore**



Forward Singapore:

# Keeping Up with the Changing World of Work

As megatrends such as artificial intelligence, climate change and geopolitics redefine industries and entire economies – the global workforce is being reshaped and skills, jobs, as well as ways of working are at risk of becoming obsolete at an unprecedented pace. In the midst of such a relentlessly changing environment, what is Singapore doing to help workers stay relevant?



**G**rowing up, many Singaporeans probably heard – and followed – the well-meaning advice to study hard, get into a good school and land a well-paid job after graduation.

But what happens if one's job was made redundant due to technological disruption? Offshored as part of business restructuring? Or as graduates from the class of 2020 found during the pandemic – the job opportunities they were seeking simply did not exist as companies tightened their belts in a challenging economy.

## Learning Beyond School

With the proliferation of jobs today that did not exist just five years ago, workers are increasingly finding the implied narrative that once formal schooling ends, learning stops – irrelevant. A shift towards a mindset of lifelong learning is needed.

To help Singaporeans embrace and smoothly transit to the new economy, the Singapore government launched the SkillsFuture initiative in 2015 to provide Singaporeans with upskilling opportunities. All Singaporeans aged 25 and over – and have likely completed full-time

## FOCUS

education – received S\$500 in SkillsFuture Credits, which could be used to pay for eligible courses. Since then, SkillsFuture has evolved into a national movement encompassing citizens from their schooling to silver years.

Today, Singaporeans understand the need to upskill and reskill as current jobs become obsolete and new jobs are created. In the Forward Singapore (Forward SG) report released in October 2023, Singaporeans surveyed not only hoped to upgrade existing skills, but were also open to undertaking “a significant reboot in the middle of their careers to seize new opportunities.”

### FORWARD

#### What is Forward Singapore?

Spanning from June 2022 to October 2023, Forward Singapore (Forward SG) was a 16-month review to refresh Singapore’s social compact, shared values and aspirations as a society, and chart a roadmap for the next decade and beyond. Over 200,000 Singaporeans took part in the exercise.

#### Learning While Working

The Forward SG report also laid out challenges that workers faced in reskilling and upgrading themselves. Concerns raised include uneven access to in-house training across employers and lack of financial support while pursuing full-time or long-term studies. At

the same time, mature workers often had to juggle financial and caregiving responsibilities.

SkillsFuture has alleviated some of the financial barriers – but the Forward SG report acknowledged that “more still need[ed] to be done”. To tackle this, the SkillsFuture Level-Up Programme for Singaporeans aged 40 and above was announced during the Singapore Budget 2024. Eligible Singaporeans received a SkillsFuture Credit top-up of S\$4,000 in May 2024, which can be used to offset course fees. Starting from 2025, workers taking full-time, and long-form courses can also apply for the SkillsFuture Mid-Career Training Allowance, which offers up to S\$3,000 per month.

Foreseeably, employers also have a part to play if these programmes were to achieve the desired outcomes – being a crucial part of the unique tripartite

system in Singapore between the government, employers and unions. The tripartite system has uplifted generations of Singaporeans and continues to play a crucial role in refreshing our social compact. Mr Patrick Tay, Assistant Secretary-General, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) said, “Employers play a critical role in enhancing and developing the capabilities of our workforce – and they stand to gain from better skilled workers who are agile and able to be deployed to different job functions for better wages and work prospects.”

In that vein, NTUC offers the NTUC Company Training Committee Grant to help businesses implement business transformation projects – such as skills upgrading and jobs redesign. This complements existing government schemes such as SkillsFuture course fee subsidies for employer-sponsored



## 168

Company Training Committee Grant projects approved across

## 150

unique companies



training, up to 90% for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

**Learning Towards Fulfilment**

These initiatives and policy shifts are gradually shifting the societal mindset towards lifelong learning. And more than that – it seems Singaporeans no longer use remuneration as the only factor in determining a ‘good job’. This is outlined in the Forward SG report, where Singaporeans “show a growing desire [...] to go beyond the pay cheque – to include a sense of meaning and purpose, and the opportunity to develop mastery of skills.”

Likewise – societal definitions of a ‘good job’ are also slowly changing alongside this aspirational shift. At present, ‘hands’ and ‘heart’ jobs such as skilled crafts and trades and healthcare are frequently deemed less desirable than knowledge-based, white-collar jobs. Yet, workers in these jobs provide valuable and skilled services essential to the running of society.

Work is underway to offer better training and career pathways for these industries – so that Singaporeans with diverse roles and interests can pursue their

career ambitions and create meaningful learning journeys for themselves.

As then-Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said in his Budget 2024 speech, “[W]e will reap the full benefits only if all of us – government, employers, workers, and unions – lean forward to truly deepen this culture of lifelong learning and skills mastery. This must be our shared commitment to one another – to help our fellow Singaporeans develop to their fullest potential, and to have productive and meaningful careers.”

## What do Singaporeans think about upskilling and training?



**73%** agreed or strongly agreed that training was a meaningful use of time



**Key Barriers to Attending Courses**



**77%**  
Lack of financial resources to fund training



**72%**  
Lack of knowledge about skills needed to stay relevant



**77%**  
Lack of time



**55%**  
Lack of support from employers for self-initiated training

Source: #EveryWorkerMatters Conversations Report



Scan to read Chapter 3 of the Forward SG report.

From Skills to Success:

# NTUC's Commitment to Singapore's Workforce

In all of Singapore's history since independence, only two major strikes have been recorded<sup>1</sup> – a contrast to rising strike activities globally<sup>2</sup> fuelled by rising costs and falling wages.



Photo: National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)

**Mr Patrick Tay**  
Assistant Secretary-General, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)

Singapore's harmonious labour landscape is a rarity in today's world – hard-won from decades of sustained tripartism between the government (represented by the Ministry of Manpower), unions (represented by the National Trades Union Congress) and employers (represented by the Singapore National Employers Federation).

As the industrial sector is rapidly reshaped by sustainability goals, accelerated digitalisation

and tech innovation, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) continues to play a pivotal role as a key partner to the government in shaping Singapore's current and future policies – particularly in ensuring the longevity and prosperity of workers' careers. NTUC's Assistant Secretary-General Mr Patrick Tay said, "One recent example would be the Forward Singapore (Forward SG) initiative by the Singapore Government. Under Forward SG's Empower pillar, we see our main role to be advocating

for policies and initiatives that empower workers, especially when it comes to enhancing their work and career prospects."

## Giving Workers a Voice

Notably, the unique three-way collaboration in Singapore is not only different from the traditionally adversarial relationship between unions and employers, it is also central to a common goal – help workers stay relevant and employable.

Workers today are operating in a rapidly changing world. To better support workers and shape policies that have workers' interests at heart, NTUC's Strategy team initiated a study to explore the implications of shifting to a green economy for workers two years ago.

The study found that workers viewed unions as playing a crucial role in ensuring a just transition – by facilitating upskilling and reskilling, providing personalised support for career transition and advocating for workers' interests. Mr Tay said, "These findings show how important it is that we keep this conversation going with workers, alongside our tripartite partners and other stakeholders."

More recently in 2022, NTUC also launched the #EveryWorkerMatters Conversations (#EWMC) to understand workers' concerns and aspirations,

<sup>1</sup> The 1986 Hydril strike authorised by NTUC, and the 2012 SMRT bus drivers' wildcat strike. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/explainer-what-role-unions-singapore-and-are-strikes-legal>

<sup>2</sup> Major strike activity increased by 280% in 2023. <https://www.epi.org/publication/major-strike-activity-in-2023/>



**42,000**

workers of all ages, professions and sectors engaged in #EWMC

and refresh the Workers' Compact for current and future generations of workers. This was done in parallel with the government's Forward SG exercise to chart Singapore's future roadmap. #EWMC findings eventually informed Chapter 3 of the Forward SG report – which covered the Empower pillar centring around jobs and the economy.

Mr Tay said, "We were happy that what we collected offered the government with insights to – concerns, ideas, hopes and aspirations of workers on the ground. It was also heartening to see a rich cross-sharing of ideas when government staff attended #EWMC engagements and union leaders attended Forward SG events."

**Finding Win-Win Solutions**

A mutually beneficial employer-worker ecosystem underpins Singapore's progressive tripartite partnership. That is why NTUC takes on a proactive

**"NTUC will keep pushing ahead with our advocacy. Ultimately, we hope to achieve consensus among tripartite partners on areas that improve our workers' lives and livelihoods – and the common good of Singapore's economy and society."**

**Mr Patrick Tay**

Assistant Secretary-General, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)

role in bridging concerns of workers and employers.

For instance, a key finding from #EWMC notes that besides caregiving and retirement adequacy, upskilling remains one of workers' top-of-mind concerns. 47% of surveyed workers cited upskilling for career development as the area they needed the most support in. Barriers cited included lack of financial resources and understanding of the type of training needed.

Employers are similarly worried about financial resources and the type of training needed for business and workforce transformation. To help alleviate the stress of workers, NTUC's Union Training Assistance Programme (UTAP) offers extra funding support for NTUC members to undergo skills training. Concurrently, its Company Training Committee (CTC) initiative also provides employers with access to NTUC's expertise on skills gap identification and funding for job redesign and training.

Thus far, over 3,000 workers have received an average of 5% wage increment or benefits from career development plans as a result of the CTCs. Mr Tay said, "By adopting such a



**>2,100**

Company Training Committees (CTCs) formed



**>200,000**

workers equipped with skills to secure better wages and work prospects

collaborative approach, NTUC advocates for workers while adding value for employer partners. And ultimately, achieve win-win outcomes for companies and workers."

**Staying Ahead of the Curve**

With the successful conclusion of #EWMC in 2023, NTUC has set to work – using #EWMC recommendations and the refreshed Workers' Compact as the reference point. "We are glad that so far, the government has heeded several of NTUC's calls on better unemployment support and flexible work arrangements through Forward SG policy shifts and the Budget 2024," said Mr Tay.

But NTUC's work is far from done. Mr Tay explained, "As we push ahead with our advocacy, we are making an effort to ensure that NTUC stays agile and adaptable to better serve workers in our rapidly changing world." Besides fostering an innovation culture within the organisation, teams such as the Strategy unit – which operates as NTUC's think tank – is working collaboratively with academic institutions, government bodies and industry partners on research studies and innovation projects to shape NTUC's strategic direction.

Yet, even as NTUC evolves to keep pace with workers' needs in an era of disruption, one thing remains the same. Mr Tay said, "Industrial relations in many countries have become more adversarial, leading to poorer outcomes for workers, employers, and even affecting the well-being of society at large. That is why we must continue to sustain tripartism as Singapore's competitive advantage and work hand-in-hand to ensure industrial peace and stability, establishing Singapore as a role model for international labour standards."

## Singapore Cooperation Programme: **Partnerships Past, Present, Future**

In 1992, the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) launched the Singapore Cooperation Programme as a way of sharing our development experience and paying it forward for the international assistance received in Singapore's early years of independence. But did you know that there was another compelling reason behind it?

**A**s an island state without a hinterland and natural resources, its people are often cited as Singapore's most valuable resource.

To keep the Singaporean workforce dynamic and relevant in the global market, upskilling and lifelong learning are critical to Singapore's survival. Little wonder then that education and human capital development have figured strongly in Singapore's priorities and strategies since independence.

This ethos went on to inspire the establishment of the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) in 1992, Singapore's flagship platform for extending technical assistance and capacity building towards developing countries.

### **Rallying Partners within Singapore**

With the intention of sharing Singapore's experiences and policies in dealing with common issues faced by developing countries, SCP courses cover a wide range of topics – including sustainability, digitalisation, connectivity, trade and economy, leadership and governance, public health, and national resilience.



^  
**Ms Jolene Tan**  
Director-General  
(Technical Cooperation Directorate),  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Singapore

The diverse range of topics and areas of expertise means that the MFA's Technical Cooperation Directorate (TCD) – which manages the SCP – often has to look beyond its own expertise. Ms Jolene Tan, Director-General of TCD, said, "Besides having our training agencies put together comprehensive course programmes, we also rope in experts from across the Singapore government to share their hands-on knowledge and experiences in tackling current challenges faced in their respective fields." Past speakers at SCP courses include Associate

**"We hope that by sharing our knowledge and experience, officials can distil relevant parts of their learning for adaptation back home, tweaking as they see fit to their countries' needs."**

Professor David Ng (Associate Dean, National Institute of Education), Mr Jason Tan (Director, Infocomm Media Development Authority) and Ms Lim Melin (Head Consultant, Singapore Food Agency).

She continued, "SCP doesn't just tap on resources within the public sector. We welcome alternative perspectives from the private sector, which enhance the learning experiences of our participants." Private sector partners who facilitated learning journeys for SCP participants recently include





**>50**

local and international training partners

global investment firm BNY Mellon and Singapore companies such as Garuda Robotics, which develops unmanned aircraft and artificial intelligence systems, and AirCarbon Exchange, a global exchange platform for trading carbon credits and other environmental instruments in support of sustainability goals.

### Nurturing Partnerships beyond Borders

Over the years, SCP has hosted participants at various stages of their careers, from those starting out to senior officials such as Ministers and Permanent Secretaries. On catering to the diversity of SCP participants, Ms Tan said, “We are mindful that everyone’s circumstances are different, and would not want to adopt a prescriptive approach. Rather, we hope that by sharing our knowledge and experience, officials can distil relevant parts of their learning for

adaptation back home, tweaking as they see fit to their countries’ needs. We also hope that our participants’ experiences have a catalytic effect, as they share what they’ve learnt with colleagues in their countries.”

Today, SCP alumni include distinguished officials such as Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Lao Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Minister of Foreign Affairs Saleumxay Kommasith. Recalling a meeting with DPM Saleumxay in late 2023, Ms Tan said, “DPM Saleumxay was one of SCP’s early beneficiaries back in 1993, and he shared that in the 1990s, no one knew how to use the few computers they had in his Ministry. He was thus sent on an SCP course for computer training. What made it especially heartening was that despite the 30-year interval, he still remembers his SCP experience fondly.”

“In fact, he remains in contact with some of the friends he made during the course – an experience echoed by many SCP alumni,” Ms Tan said. Beyond learning course material, SCP alumni often come away with a richer life experience and deeper understanding of Singapore. “SCP hopes that all alumni remain lifelong friends of Singapore, and we are grateful that many of them have so positively recounted their experiences in Singapore even decades later.”

The course that DPM Saleumxay attended was also one of the many courses SCP conducts jointly with like-minded training partners from around the world. These partners include countries such as Thailand, Japan, and the United States; as well as international organisations like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. To train officials from Africa and the Middle East, SCP has

### Did you know?

SCP also runs the **Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI)**, which was launched in 2000 during Singapore’s ASEAN Chairmanship. Under IAI, SCP operates:



#### 4 Singapore Cooperation Centres (SCCs)

- Cambodia-Singapore Cooperation Centre (CSCC)
- Laos-Singapore Cooperation Centre (LSCC)
- Myanmar-Singapore Cooperation Centre (MSCC)
- Vietnam-Singapore Cooperation Centre (VSCC)



#### Objectives

- Narrow developmental gaps within ASEAN
- Enhance regional integration and ASEAN’s competitiveness as a region
- Offer capacity-building courses for local officials



**>50,000**

officials have attended IAI courses



## ALLIES IN ACTION

also collaborated with host countries to set up overseas training centres in Qatar, Jordan and Oman.

### Seeding Partnerships for the Future

In 2022, SCP celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary at a reception attended by partners and alumni, past and present. Significantly, the Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) was also launched. The SAP aims to enhance the capability of developing countries in various sustainability-related areas, including developing sustainability infrastructure and building resilience in water resources.

Ms Tan said, “We live in an uncertain world – and our hope is that SCP can furnish our participants with the skillsets necessary to navigate the global environment, anticipate trends and adapt policies and strategies to deal with emerging challenges. SAP is SCP’s response to the growing urgency of climate change and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

Also in the lineup are courses on emerging areas such as fintech governance, start-up ecosystems, artificial intelligence and aviation sustainability, as well as international law and arbitration. “We are committed to enhancing SCP courses to meet our participants’ evolving needs. Which is why our theme for this year’s SCP Training Calendar – Future-Ready – says it all.”

Even as SCP has its sights on the future, Ms Tan emphasised the importance of SCP friends and partners – past, present and future. She said, “While we look forward to growing our network, we are ever grateful to our alumni and partners for their steadfast support over the past 32 years. May we remain close friends and collaborators for years to come.”

Join us for upcoming SCP courses – scan to check for the course lineup and apply.



#### SCP Calendar



#### Apply for SCP Courses



## Hear from our SCC Coordinators.

**“Many CSCC alumni who attended courses as junior officials are now occupying senior echelons in government and the private sector, making important contributions to society today. This is a solid affirmation of the work we do at CSCC.”**



#### Jeremy Chua

Coordinator, Cambodia-Singapore Cooperation Centre

**“As the LSCC Coordinator, I am involved in promoting Singapore’s approach and dedication to capacity building in Lao PDR. The knowledge that my work contributes to the strengthening of relations between the two nations keeps me going.”**



#### Joanna Pee

Coordinator, Laos-Singapore Cooperation Centre

**“Since COVID-19, we have gradually resumed in-person programmes at MSCC. As participants have shared that in-person courses offer better learning and networking outcomes, I’m glad we can offer them again despite challenges on the ground.”**



#### Vimalam Marimuthu

Coordinator, Myanmar-Singapore Cooperation Centre

**“My role involves fostering strategic partnerships and people-to-people exchanges crucial to enhancing our programmes’ value and effectiveness. It gives me joy whenever VSCC participants share positive feedback on how they have benefitted from our programmes.”**



#### Liew Pei Shan

Coordinator, Vietnam-Singapore Cooperation Centre

Interested to read about the SCC experience?

Three of our SCC participants share their SCC stories on the next page.

# Leading with Lifelong Learning

Learning is important for everyone – and these three senior officials show how they are walking the talk with their recent learning experiences at the Singapore Cooperation Centres (SCCs).



## Mr Souriya Meunviseth

Deputy Chief of Division  
(Information and Public  
Relations), Bank of the Lao  
PDR

Laos-Singapore Cooperation  
Centre Course Participant



### Course taken:

Speechwriting and Public  
Presentation Skills



### What was one thing you liked about the course?

The teachers were not only knowledgeable, but also caring and passionate. They were patient in helping us understand and improve – tirelessly offering words of encouragement and advice as we practised our new skills.



### How have your new skills been useful to your work?

I could use them right away. Skills like speechwriting and public speaking are essential for my current role. These days, I have more confidence in preparing speeches or serving as an emcee.



### Why is lifelong learning important – even for senior officials?

Things are changing so quickly that we cannot stop learning, no matter what career stage we are at.

Learning new skills will prepare us to cope with any unexpected situations that arise in the future.



### What are some useful learning tips?

One great way is through classes like those at the LSCC – the teachers are experienced, the courses are run efficiently and you get to learn with a diverse group of learners.

**“When I started my current role last year, I did some self-learning with the help of social media and my supportive colleagues. However, my knowledge was not well-founded or organised. After attending this course, I now have a better understanding of how to discharge my responsibilities in an effective and professional manner.”**

## REFLECTIONS



### H.E. Serei Borapich

Secretary of State,  
Public Relation and  
Communication, Ministry of  
Commerce (Cambodia)  
Cambodia-Singapore  
Cooperation Centre Course  
Participant



#### Course taken:

Speechwriting and  
Public Presentation Skills



#### What was one thing you liked about the course?

The diversity of the course participants created an interactive social space where we could share different perspectives, practices and challenges. This not only enhanced our learning, but also advanced our personal and professional relationships.



#### How have your new skills been useful to your work?

Being able to write meaningful speeches and deliver effective presentations enable me to be a more effective communicator in various situations, from public speaking to negotiations.



#### Why is lifelong learning important – even for senior officials?

Like junior officials, senior officials

need to refine and update their skills to match the dynamic and fast-growing work environment.



#### What are some useful learning tips?

Rather than setting an unfeasible goal from the beginning, identify your learning objectives beforehand and start small. Consistency is key.

**“Learning remains a priority for me despite my demanding work schedule because I believe it is essential for developing strong communication skills and producing persuasive speeches. Being able to communicate well enables me to contribute positively towards the success of important tasks and inspiring others through words.”**



### Mr Nguyen Duc Thuan

Director, Vietnam  
Environment Protection  
Fund, Ministry of Natural  
Resources and Environment  
Vietnam-Singapore  
Cooperation Centre Course  
Participant



#### Courses taken:

Clean Energy and Emission  
Reduction, Sustainable Waste  
Management and Smart  
Urbanisation



#### What was one thing you liked about the courses?

The courses were well-organised and provided me with valuable insights into environmental and sustainability issues.



#### How have your new skills been useful to your work?

The Vietnam Environment Protection Fund's main objective is to provide concessional loans and grants for projects related to environmental protection. By learning about the technical, financial and management perspectives of waste management and clean energy, my team and I can better evaluate the proposals we receive.



#### Why is lifelong learning important – even for senior officials?

Staying up-to-date with the latest knowledge and skills is essential for

good leadership and management. I cannot imagine leading my team well with outdated or insufficient information.



#### What are some useful learning tips?

Actively participate in discussions and interact with your classmates; don't hesitate to ask questions and seek clarification. These will greatly enhance your understanding and learning experience.

**“I took my first course at the Centre back in 2006. The course exceeded my expectations. Thereafter, whenever my career grows and I need to learn new skills and knowledge, I always keep a look out for relevant courses at the Centre – and sign up when the opportunity presents itself.”**