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VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR EMPLOYABILITY IN SINGAPORE AND PHILIPPINES

Catherine Ramos
The HEAD Foundation
catherine.ramos@headfoundation.org

Saravanan Gopinathan
The HEAD Foundation

Abstract

This paper discusses the Singapore's pre-employment training and continuing education and training with particular focus on its technical and vocational education, SkillsFuture national initiative, and the Workforce Qualification System. The Philippine's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is also discussed to make the point that differences in approaches to TVET are driven by level of development and geo-political contexts. Context is thus key in understanding the policies and approaches in education systems and how countries tackle skills issues.

Introduction

Singapore is well-known in international education circles for its success in developing a high performing education system as measured through a benchmarking exercise called Programme for International Student Assessment as well as for its dynamic, future-oriented and industry-linked human capital development initiatives. With a strong reform culture and well-funded pre-employment education and training (PET) and continuing education and training (CET), Singapore has succeeded well in addressing skills demand in every phase of its development. Gopinathan's various accounts of Singapore education have noted that even at the very beginning of independence from Malaysia in 1965, education has been central to building the economy of the nation (Gopinathan, 2013). The key imperative was to build an economy on human capital, not natural resources. An OECD (2011) report noted that one of the major source of Singapore's competitive advantage lies in "the ability of the government to successfully match supply with demand of education and skills" (p. 159). It also praised a culture of continuous improvement, leadership, vision and alignment between policy and practice as among the key attributes of successful educational development in Singapore. Singapore success is not only reflected in its education system but in the overall economy—in 1965, the per capita GDP was about US$500 and it had risen to approximately US$55,000 today.

More recently, in early 2015, the Singapore government launched the SkillsFuture initiative, a national movement to emphasize the need for skills relevance and deepening as a way of ensuring high quality lifelong learning and employment as Singapore continues its transition to an innovation economy. Globalisation, technology-driven disruption, and youth unemployment worldwide has energised policy makers in Singapore. SkillsFuture's three main aims include integration of education, training and career progression; promotion of industry support for individuals to advance based on skills; and the further efforts to foster a culture of lifelong learning.

This paper documents Singapore's technical and vocational education that is part of the formal education system and its CET that also covers vocational training. The recently implemented SkillsFuture and the relatively young Workforce Qualification Systems are discussed. The Philippine TVET system will also be discussed to make the point that differences in approaches to TVET are driven by the level of economic development of a country, and thus a comparative study of TVET in Asia may pose a challenge as it requires certain disclaimers due to differences in political and socio-economic contexts. Singapore has the status of

developed country as compared to other Southeast Asian countries which are considered low- to middle-income, and have also much bigger populations than Singapore. Context is therefore a key in understanding the policies and approaches in education systems and how countries tackle skills issues. In Asia, the type and causes of skill imbalances and their solutions differ across economies as they are strongly influenced by their level of development and structure of industries.

Pre-employment training (PET) and continuing education and training (CET) in Singapore

National educational systems may be depicted in terms of a number of characteristics, two of the most common being institutions and qualifications. In terms of institutions, two sectors can be highlighted for Singapore, the pre-employment training (PET) and the continuing education and training (CET). Until September 2015, Singapore post-secondary sectors or PET were quite separate from the continuing education system. Before, these were run under the auspices of two different Ministries – PET under the Ministry of Education and CET under the Ministry of Manpower – with their own national portfolios. But in late September 2015, two ministers of education are appointed, one minister for schools overseeing the pre-school, primary, secondary and junior college education, and one minister for higher education and skills overseeing the Institutes of technical education, polytechnics, universities and the SkillsFuture initiative. A rationale for this move was explained in a joint statement by the two ministers:

> "PM's decision to appoint two Acting Education Ministers is a strong signal – that while the system is expanding in both scale and complexity, we are determined to continue building more and better pathways for Singaporeans to pursue their passions and fulfil their aspirations." (CNA, 2015)

Pre-employment training

Pre-employment training (PET) embraces (apart from the secondary schools) Junior Colleges/Centralised Institutes (GCE Advanced Level: 'A' Level); the Institute of Technical Education (certificates: Master NITEC [National Institute of Technical Education Certificate], Higher NITEC, NITEC and ISCs [ITE Skills Certificates); polytechnics (diplomas and advanced diplomas); and universities (degrees and higher degrees) – as well as a number of private institutions. The post-secondary education categories have grown over the past decade, particularly the universities and ITE. These institutions, collectively encapsulated within the term pre-employment training or 'PET', are well established and well recognised in both Singaporean society and internationally. They prepare learners for entry into the workforce, providing young people with a broad, general education, academic development and in the case of ITE and the Polytechnics, rounded and high quality vocational preparation for moving into first jobs.

Compulsory education in Singapore stops at the primary level; notwithstanding, the enrolment rates are near universal. Secondary school graduates can proceed to academic or vocational route depending on their school grade, and those who follow

the academic route will need to complete junior college (2 years) or polytechnic diploma (3 years) before entering university. Graduates from polytechnics are considered job-ready but many seek to upgrade to a degree as the expected salary and career progression of polytechnic graduate is lower than a university graduate. Secondary school graduates who were not admitted to academic route can enter the formal vocational schooling at the Institutes of Technical Education (ITE). ITE is the principal provider of vocational and technical education in Singapore at the technician and semi-professional level. After vocational education, the graduates may opt to start on a job or continue further studies in polytechnics or other institutions. Figure 1 in the appendix shows the education pathways.

The aim of ITE education is to equip students with the technical knowledge to meet the workforce needs of different industries. About 25% students in Singapore go to ITE for full-time study as continuance of their secondary schooling; and in 2014, almost 90% of ITE graduates found jobs within six months of graduation (MOE, n.d). Part-time courses are also available for graduates of ITE and adult learners. In terms of ITE tuition fees, Singapore citizens only pay S$320-570 (US$227-404) annually while permanent residents pay S$4,250-7,600 (US$3,015-5,392) and international students S$10,650-19,000 (US$7,556-13,480). Financial assistance schemes ranging from $300 (US$212) to $1,200 (US$851) are available to citizens depending on household's income (MOE, n.d).

ITE is part of the formal education system in Singapore offering vocational education, but there is another national credentialing system called Workforce Qualification System (WSQ) that is also vocational in nature that promotes continuing education and training.

Continuing Education and Training (CET)

The Singaporean Government has emphasised its commitment to economic growth based on skills, innovation and productivity involving the development of "an outstanding, comprehensive, nation-wide CET system", where learning and acquiring new skills throughout life becomes the norm for every Singaporean (ESC 2010, p. 7).

CET offers educational programmes for adults, usually at the post-secondary level and offered as part-time or short courses in occupational subject areas, with the key aim of enhancing employability. At the onset of the global economic recession in 2008, Singapore leveraged on the national CET system to help companies and workers manage the downturn through investing in skills development. The implementation of Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (SPUR) brought together a full range of skills' upgrading programmes with enhanced financial support for companies and workers. It helped companies cut costs and save jobs, while workers re-skilled and up-skilled. Support came through course fee subsidies and absentee payroll for local workers sent for training at approved SPUR training providers. Job assistance and training programmes for jobseekers were also expanded.

The CET system in Singapore had a big boost in 2008 with the announcement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of a CET Master Plan intended to prepare Singaporean workers for emerging and growth industries as new entrants, career switchers or up-graders. In support of this, the government has topped-up the

Lifelong Learning Endowment Fund from $800 million in 2008 to $3 billion, and eventually to S$5 billion (MOM, 2008). Employers who contribute a Skills Development Levy (SDL) remain key players in this plan. Originally enacted in 1979 and revised in October 2008, contribution coverage is at 0.25% of the monthly remuneration for each employee with a minimum payable of S$2 or US$1.42 for income of less than S$800 [US$567] a month, and maximum S$11.25 or US$7.98 for income of more than S$4,500 [US$3,192] a month. The amount collected goes to the Skills Development Fund to support the workforce training programmes and provide grants to employers when they send their employees to attend training under the national Continuing Education and Training system. The SDL and SDF are administrated by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), the government's agency in charge of national training programmes to assist the workforce remain competitive and employable.

Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ)

The Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) as a national credentialing system is key to facilitating transition from the traditional pre-employment (PET) sector towards the continuing education and training (CET) sector. WSQ was implemented in 2005 and designed to help workers to gain jobs, advance in their jobs, move into new jobs, make the transition between jobs and even across industry sectors – commonly referred to as the "4 Ms": move into work, move up in position, move between organisations and move across industry.

There are three skill sets that form the basis of WSQ: occupational skills, industry skills, and employability skills. Occupational skills are job specific skills required to perform one's work. Industry skills are broad industry skills and know-how. Employability skills are generic and portable skills applicable for all industries. The WSQ qualifications have six levels: (1) Certificate, (2) Higher Certificate), (3) Advanced Certificate, (4) Diploma, (5) Specialist Diploma, (6) Graduate Diploma or Graduate Certificate. WSQ courses have been purposively designed to be: competency-based, work- and job-focused, vocational in nature, open access, industry-led and appropriate for adult learners. These qualifications are provided by a range of public and in-house training providers.

The development of WSQ includes close collaboration with industry which include the formation of Sectoral Manpower Skills and Training Councils. In each council, an industry leader serves as Chairman and the council members include industry key players, industry associations, union representative, economic agencies or government representatives. The role of each industry is to advise and endorse WSQ development and implementation. National standards developed by the WDA in collaboration with various industries provide the basis for industry sectoral frameworks employed by this system. Thus, the WSQ serves to professionalise the industries, increase labour market flexibility and enhance skills portability (WDA, n.d).

Aside from industry councils, the other considered building blocks of WSQ include National CET Qualifications Framework, Quality Assurance System, and CET institutions. In terms of quality assurance, the training providers needed approval before conducting WSQ courses, and each WSQ courses need accreditation, and trainers have standards to follow. Other activities to ensure quality

include continuous improvement reviews, policy guidelines, advice and support for training organisations, and management of the issuance of WSQ credentials.

Singapore government's commitment to skills deepening is seen in the generous subsidies it offers. Course fee subsidies range from 50-95% for self-sponsored individuals. Level of subsidies depends on accreditation by WDA of the training centres and courses, age of the individual, citizenship, and whether the courses are at the Professional, Managerial, Executive (PME) level or non-PME level. On top of the course fee subsidy, a training allowance of S$4.50 (US$3.19) per hour is also given to Singapore citizens aged at least 35 years and earning S$1,900 (US$1,348) a month. Details of funding can be found in Annex tables 1-5. For employer-sponsored training, the government provides the same range of subsidies of 50-95% to the employer as well as absentee payroll ranging from 80-95% of hourly basic salaries at certain caps. The funding to employers is also differentiated based on whether the courses are conducted in-house or by external providers, and size of the company, see Annex tables 1-4. Higher subsidies go to small and medium enterprises. The absentee payroll is a form of subsidising employees' salaries while on training, and the present rates are found in Annex table 5.

SkillsFuture: A marriage of CET Masterplan and ASPIRE

SkillsFuture as a national movement is the result of the recommendation of two national initiatives called Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE [Institute of Technical Education] Review (ASPIRE) and the Continuing Education and Training (CET) Masterplan 2020. SKillsFuture's four key thrusts include (i) helping individuals to make well-informed choices in education, training and careers, (2) develop an integrated, high-quality system of education and training that responds to constantly evolving industry needs, (3) promote employer recognition and career development based on skills and mastery, (4) foster a culture that supports and celebrates lifelong learning (WDA, 2015). The programmes and initiatives under SkillsFuture are grouped by beneficiaries: students, early career employees, from mid-career employees and older, employers, training providers/adult educators. Details of SkillsFuture programmes and initiatives are well presented online (www.skillsfuture.sg) including the contacts for particular programmes. These programmes are summarised here for easy reference.

- Programmes for students include-- education and career guidance; enhanced internships; individual learning portfolio which is a one-stop online portal for education, training and career guidance to assist the individuals in planning their education, training and career; and the young talent programme or overseas immersion program for polytechnic and ITE students.
- Programmes for early-career employees include -- education and career guidance and individual learning portfolio as mentioned above; P-Max; SkillsFuture credit; Earn and Learn Programme; and study awards. While students have career guidance facilities in their schools, working adults can access the career coaching and training services offered by the WDA's network of career centres.

The P-Max is an enhanced Place-and-Train programme aiming to place PMEs in small and medium enterprises. SkillsFuture credit is meant to encourage individual ownership of skills development and lifelong learning by giving Singaporeans aged 25 years and above a credit of $500 from January 2016 with periodic top ups that can be used to pay for courses on top of other government subsidies; this credit has no expiration. The SkillsFuture Earn and Learn Programme is a place-and-train for fresh ITE and polytechnic graduates to equip them with industry-relevant skills through a structured on-the-job and institution-based training. SkillsFuture Study Award is a monetary award of $5,000 given to 500 early-and mid-career individuals from October 2015 and later on the number of recipients will be increased up to 2000 per year.

- Mid-career workers enjoy the same programmes that the early-career workers enjoy and a few more namely, skills-based modular courses; leadership development initiative; enhanced subsidy for Singaporeans aged 40 years and above to receive up to 90% course fee subsidy for WDA-funded courses; and SkillsFuture Fellowship of $10,000 cash for up to 100 individuals starting 2016 to help them gain mastery of their field of specialisation.
- For employers, they benefit from P-Max (SMEs receive training in hiring, HR practices, and communication, as well as grant of $5,000 for retaining newly-hired PME for six months); sectoral manpower plans for future growth strategies and opportunities; earn and learn programme by receiving $15,000 (to offset the cost of developing and providing structure training for fresh ITE and polytechnic graduates); employer awards; and pool of mentors for SMEs.

These initiatives under the SkillsFuture cost a lot of resources and it is expected that constant review of implementation is in order to make sure that these initiatives are truly aligned with the objectives or intended impact.

TVET in the Philippines

The technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in the Philippines is regulated by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). It was created in August 1994 by enactment of Republic Act No 7996: Technical Education and Skills Development Act which aims to encourage the full participation and mobilisation of the industry, labor, local government units, and technical-vocational institutions in skills development. TESDA was formed from the merger of three government institutions namely, National Manpower and Youth Council of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Bureau of Technical and Vocational Education of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports, and the Apprenticeship Program of the Bureau of Local Employment of the DOLE (TESDA, n.d.). The major thrust of TESDA is the formulation of comprehensive development plan for middle-level manpower. It undertakes training provision which is delivered by

a network of public and private institutions through different modes: school-based, centre-based, enterprise-based, and community-based technology programmes.

The school-based programs include post-secondary offerings of varying duration not exceeding three years. There are 57 TESDA-administered schools of which 31 are trade schools, 19 are agricultural schools, and 7 are fishery schools. Training-based programs are delivered in the 60 training centers comprising 15 regional and 45 provincial centers. Specialised training centers include the Women's Center that seeks to advance the economic status of women, the Language Skills Institute (31 institutes nationwide) that caters mostly to workers intending to work abroad and offers language courses such as English, Korean, Mandarin, Japanese, and Spanish, and the Korea-Philippines IT Training located at two polytechnics and at two regional skills development centers. Community-based training for enterprise development is primarily addressed to the poor and marginal groups who cannot access or are not accessible by formal training provisions. Enterprise-based programs are training programs implemented within companies and can be in the form of apprenticeship of 4-6 months, learnership (or on-the-job) program for a maximum 3 months, dual training where education and training takes place in both school/training center and company (TESDA, n.d.). To ensure quality standards of the training providers, TESDA requires that 60% of the graduates should find employment within a year and that graduates need to undergo competency assessment (Legaspi, 2012).

Technical vocational education has also been introduced in selected high schools through the Strengthened Technical and Vocational Education Program (STVEP) by the Department of Education in 282 public secondary schools in 16 regions which was in line with the objectives of the Education for All (EFA) global movement, Philippine Millennium Development Goals, and the 10-Point Agenda of the Philippine Government (Valles, 2012). STVEP's main goals include providing high school graduates with opportunities to acquire certifiable vocational and technical skills that would allow more options in pursuing their post-secondary career such as college education, short term technical courses, entrepreneurship, and apprenticeship leading to employment (Valles, 2012). STVEP develop strategic partnerships with different agencies through mechanisms such as co-financing, co-sharing of resources/expertise, consortium, scholarship programmes and training activities, Adopt-a-School or Adopt-a-Student program, among others. The agencies involved include Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO INNOTECH), Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), local government units, non-government organisations, private sector, and technical and vocational institutions, universities, and colleges offering technical and vocational specialisations (Valles, 2012).

Philippine TVET has faced some challenging issues such as low quality of facilities and weak curriculum, and as such, recommendations for improvement have been identified and a set of these include those from a World Bank study (di Gropello, Tan & Tandon, 2010, pp 20-21) as follows:

- Induce greater participation of the private sector to reduce government expenditure while improving efficiency.
- Continue supporting community-based programs while reviewing the efficiency of some school-based ones
- Reduce government costs through the rationalisation of TVET providers
- Develop appropriate performance standards for TVET providers
- Update and enforce accreditation standards
- Foster closer school-industry links, in particular for school-based programs to improve the relevance of curriculum to labor market needs
- Increase industry participation in the TESDA Board
- Improve targeting of financial assistance for TVET.

Conclusion

The students and workers in Singapore have enough opportunities to engage in activities for lifelong learning and employability skills, all thanks to careful planning, high funding, strong implementation, and policy evaluation that feeds in to improving the implementation of national skills strategies which are lacking in many of the Asian countries. The imperative call for continuous economic and societal development in Singapore makes each of the government ministries particularly cognizant of their roles to play. Aside from the economic sector, the education and labour sectors have been pivotal in the economic development of Singapore, and the country is expected to keep on improving as it knows no other way. In the Philippines, though progress has been made, there are still much things to be done, from funding to partnerships, better resource allocation, relevance, quality assurance, etc. Reforms at TESDA are being continually instituted by updating many training regulations to meet the growing demand for relevant and quality technical-vocational skills training and manpower locally and abroad.

About the authors

Catherine Ramos is Research and Publication Manager at The HEAD Foundation. Prior to joining the Foundation, she worked at the Institute for Adult Learning where she was involved in the OECD's Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies and on Singapore's skills utilisation research. She also worked in areas of HR, training management, policy research and project management in the Philippines and Singapore. She has degree in Public Administration and Master in Development Economics from the University of the Philippines.

S. Gopinathan is the Academic Director of The HEAD Foundation, a Singapore-based think tank devoted to policy and practice improvement in Asian education. From 2013-2015, he was Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He has been giving consultation internationally on education and teacher policies, and was a former dean of the School of Education, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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ANNEX

Table 1. Course fee funding

	Type of course	All Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents aged ≥ 21 years	Singapore Citizens	
			Aged ≥ 40 years	Aged ≥ 35 years and earning ≤ $1,900/month
Courses offered by WDA-appointed training centres	Non-PME-level courses	Up to 90% of course fees	Up to 90% of course fees	95% of course fees
	PME-level courses	Up to 70% of course fees		
Certifiable courses approved by WDA	Non-PME-level courses	80% of course fee capped at $17/hour	90% of course fee, capped at $25/hour	95% of course fee
	PME-level courses	50% of course fee, capped at $15/hour	90% of course fee, capped at $50/hour	

Source: Singapore Workforce Development Agency, www.wda.gov.sg

Table 2. Course Fee Subsidies for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) for External Courses

	Type of Course	Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents1	Singapore Citizens	
			Aged ≥ 40 years2	Aged ≥ 35 years and earning ≤ $1,900/month3
Courses offered by WDA-appointed CET Centres	Non-PME-level Courses	Up to 90% of course fees		95% of course fees
	PME-level Courses			
Certifiable Courses approved by WDA	Non-PME-level Courses	90% of course fees, capped at $25/hour		95% of course fees
	PME-level Courses	90% of course fees, capped at $50/hour for PME level courses		
Non-Certifiable Courses approved by WDA	All	$2/hour		

Source: Singapore Workforce Development Agency, www.wda.gov.sg

Table 3: Course Fee Subsidies for Non – SMEs for External Courses

	Type of Course	Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents	Singapore Citizens	
			Aged ≥ 40 years1	Aged ≥ 35 years and earning ≤ $1,900/month2
Courses offered by WDA-appointed CET Centres	Non-PME-level Courses	Up to 90% of course fees	Up to 90% of course fees	95% of course fees
	PME-level Courses	Up to 70% of course fees		
Certifiable Courses approved by WDA	Non-PME-level Courses	80% of course fees, capped at $17/hour	90% of course fees, capped at $25/hour	95% of course fees
	PME-level Courses	50% of course fees, capped at $15/hour	90% of course fees, capped at $50/hour for PME level courses	
Non-Certifiable Courses approved by WDA	All	$2/hour		

Source: Singapore Workforce Development Agency, www.wda.gov.sg

Table 4: Course fee Subsidies for In-house Courses

	Type of Course	Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents		Singapore Citizens aged ≥ 35 years and earning ≤ $1,900/month2	
		SME1	Non-SME	SME1	Non-SME
Certifiable Courses approved by WDA	Non-PME-level Courses	$15/hour	$7/hour	$15/hour	$8.50/hour
	PME-level Courses		$15/hour		$15/hour
Non-Certifiable Courses approved by WDA	All	$2/hour			

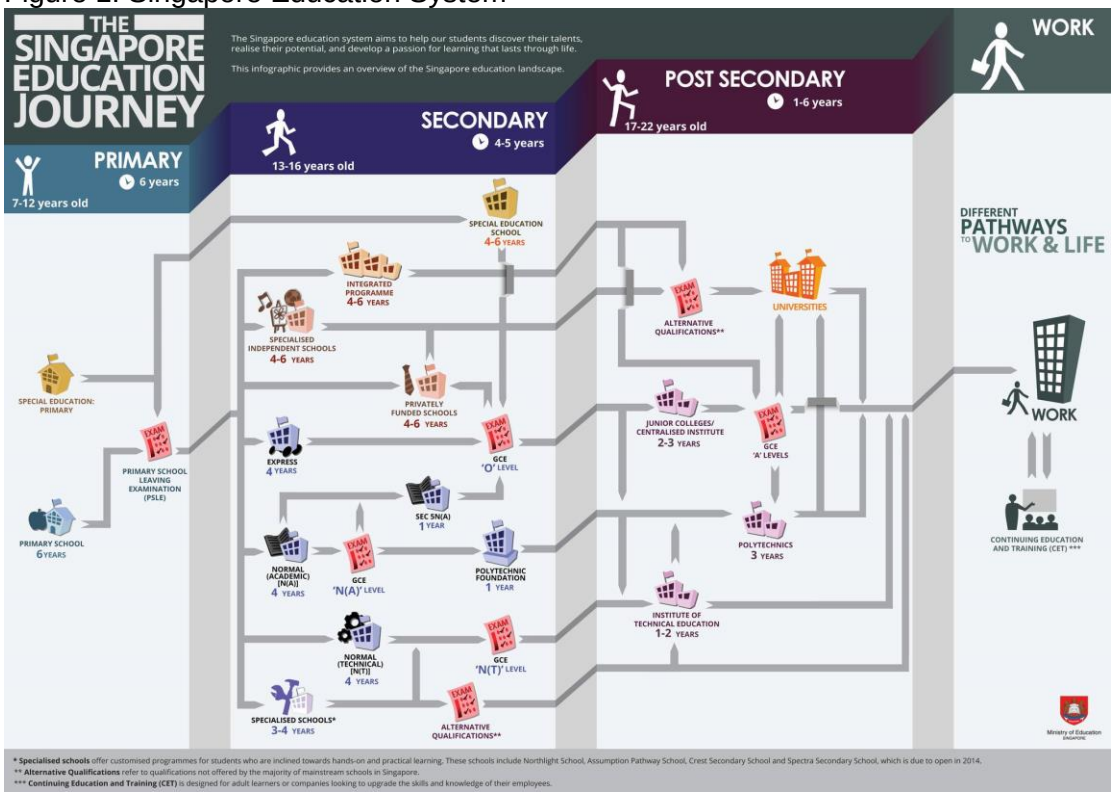
Source: Singapore Workforce Development Agency, www.wda.gov.sg

Table 5: Absentee Payroll Funding

	Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents		Singapore Citizens aged ≥ 35 years and earning ≤ $1,900/month2
	SME1	Non-SME	SME and Non-SME
Courses offered by WDA-appointed CET Centres and Certifiable Courses approved by WDA	80%of hourly basic salary capped at $7.50/hr For training outside working hours, subject to employer top-up of balance 20% of hourly basic salary, capped at $1.90/hr	80%of hourly basic salary capped at $4.50/hr For training outside working hours, subject to employer top-up of balance 20% of hourly basic salary, capped at $1.10/hr	95% of hourly basic salary For training outside working hours, subject to employer top-up of balance 5% of hourly

Source: Singapore Workforce Development Agency, www.wda.gov.sg

Figure 1. Singapore Education System



Source: Ministry of Education, www.moe.gov.sg