

New agency to drive SkillsFuture movement

August 17, 2016

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CHANGES

Singaporeans can look forward to better education and career guidance as well as more training courses geared towards adults, with the setting up of a new statutory board to coordinate the national SkillsFuture movement.

These are among some of the key priorities of the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency (SSG), that will be set up with the passing of the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency Bill yesterday.

The new statutory board will be spun off from the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) that is being restructured into SSG and Workforce Singapore. It will come under the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Speaking yesterday during the debate on the Bill, Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung said: "The establishment of SSG represents yet another milestone in Singapore's journey to build a nation of learners who have the drive to continually pursue their interests and passions, upgrade their skills, apply themselves productively and master their craft."

The minister, tasked to lead the push to reshape how people approach learning, said the move was "not for administrative or bureaucratic neatness, but to draw better synergies between the work of MOE and SSG".

Giving more information about what the agency will do, he said its priorities for a start will be to work with post-secondary education institutions, such as polytechnics, to run and expand training courses for adult learners.

It will also coordinate the work of education and career counsellors, currently under the Ministry of Education and WDA, to help people discover their strengths and interests.

Another priority it has is to streamline the accreditation and quality assurance systems of WDA and the Council for Private Education (CPE), to better regulate the private education and adult education sector.

Mr Ong said discussions have begun on this front and some changes will take place by the time SSG is formed by the fourth quarter of this year.

WHAT MPs SAY

A total of 12 MPs spoke on the Bill, stressing the importance of helping Singaporeans update their skill sets to stay relevant in the workplace.

Several MPs raised concerns about how SkillsFuture programmes can help specific groups in society, such as older workers and those with special needs.

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines GRC) said the new statutory board's focus should not be solely on the young.

"There is a need to prepare our young Singaporeans for jobs that do not exist yet today. But we should also focus on our current workforce... it is the work with the existing workforce that will result in substantive productivity gains," he said.

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar GRC), citing the results of a global study of adults' skills, said Singapore's older workers did not fare well in areas such as IT compared to their younger counterparts.

"Those without IT skills will suffer from depressed wages or, even worse, retrenchment," she said.

She urged the MOE to help older workers meet their career aspirations by developing training courses that are suitable for them. She suggested that the ministry look into what kind of jobs older workers are doing and what they hope to do in the next stage of their careers.

Other MPs, such as Ms Denise Phua (Jalan Besar GRC), hoped that the SSG would work with groups that provide services for the disabled so that they can also continue to learn new skills.

Meanwhile, Nominated MP Thomas Chua said he hoped the new agency would "look after then interests of traditional industries and SMEs and not only consider the high value-added industries or newly-emerging industries".

He asked if the MOE, which oversees SSG, understood the employment needs of all companies, including the smaller companies that are not typically popular with young people.

THE MINISTER RESPONDS

Responding to the MPs, Mr Ong cited ongoing efforts to help older Singaporeans and people with disabilities, such as the National Silver Academy, which runs courses for Singaporeans aged above 50, and SG Enable, which provides services such as job-matching and training for the disabled.

But he acknowledged that more could be done in terms of training seniors in literacy and languages, for instance.

He told MPs that SkillsFuture programmes will prepare workers for both traditional and new industries, adding that both require workers to "build a foundation of skills of depth".

"Versatility comes from depth... we must really be excellent in our craft and then we have the versatility to move to new sectors," he said.

He also assured the MPs that his ministry was attuned to the needs of companies.

The MOE higher education department works closely with industry partners in developing internships for university and polytechnic students, and also coming up with the curriculum of courses, said Mr Ong.

"This is why we... take SSG into MOE, so that we can work with industry and understand the philosophy of adult training even better," he added.

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