

Should a promising chef stay in the kitchen or go to uni?

The answer depends on how employers recruit and reward people. Paper credentials will always matter, if employers favour them over “deep skills”.



EYE ON SINGAPORE

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TWO years ago, I met a young graduate who had obtained an English language and literature degree through a private school here. Although she had graduated with honours and spoke good English, she couldn't even secure an interview when she applied to do a post-graduate teaching diploma at the National Institute of Education.

Her degree wasn't good enough for the Ministry of Education. She was advised to try for a position as an “allied educator”.

We were in touch again recently. She had been accepted into

several master's programmes in education overseas, including the prestigious Columbia University in the United States.

She wrote to me: “Despite what the leaders tell us about second, third chances and valuing skills not exam results, the employers, including the Government, still look at your results, including your O- and A-level results, even though you may have a good honours degree from a good university.

“The least they could have done was grant me an interview. At least I could have shown them that I have the right aptitude and skills.”

Another young woman told me her story. She had a polytechnic diploma in early childhood education. She proved to be a good teacher and received yearly pay rises and even won best teacher awards. But after just four years, she was told she could not expect further increments as she does

not have a degree.

Why do I raise these examples?

Because the job experiences of these young people point to underlying problems in the way Singapore employers, including the Government, recruit, recognise and reward workers.

In school, students brim with hope, and pick up skills and knowledge. In the workplace, or on its threshold, their hopes are dashed by employers who look for paper credentials, not skills.

The cost is not just borne by these young people in opportunities lost. It is borne by an entire economy and society, in potential never recognised and nurtured.

Don't take it just from me.

Hear it from an expert who knows Singapore well.

Mr Andreas Schleicher is education adviser to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). He has followed Singapore's good performance in the Programme for Inter-



national Student Assessment, a global benchmarking test for 15-year-olds that Singapore routinely acs, and which he is in charge of. He also heads an adult skills test called the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (Piaac) run by the OECD.

Piaac analyses the level and distribution of skills among adult populations, and looks at whether employers use the skills of workers well or if there is a mismatch.

Singapore is participating in the second round of Piaac. Some 5,000 adults here from 16 to 65 years old will be assessed on literacy, mathematics and problem-solving skills. The results will be out in 2016.

The first round last year tested workers in 23 countries with the results released in October. Japan ranked first in skills level – in all three fields. Finland was second in average scores across the categories. American workers scored

below average.

Mr Schleicher brought up the example of the US and Japan to illustrate why it was important that employers make optimal use of workers' skills.

The US had a low skills base, yet a vibrant economy. Why was this so?

Piaac researchers looked at the evidence and surmised that the American economy was exceptionally good at extracting value from its workers, including talented foreigners who head to the US for further education and jobs.

“It is because the employers there recognise their skills, know how to use them and are willing to pay them a premium for their skills,” explained Mr Schleicher.

He added: “The reverse is true for Japan, where rigid labour market arrangements prevent many skilled individuals, notably women, from going into jobs where their skills can be well used.”

Based on anecdotal evidence he

gathered, he agrees with graduates here who complain that employers focus too much on grades and academic credentials, using them as a proxy for skills.

In Singapore, it is common for government agencies and even private-sector employers to have different (and higher) pay scales for graduates, and to vary pay according to applicants' degree class.

But employers need to change their mindsets. Except for professional jobs requiring specific qualifications (like doctors, lawyers or architects), many other jobs these days can be performed as well by graduates and non-graduates. Think of jobs in sales and marketing, tourism and event management: Surely skills, drive and aptitude are more vital to success than whether an applicant scored a string of As in term papers.

Employers should re-examine the practice of paying non-graduates less, if they are performing the same job as graduates. Instead, they should pay and promote based on job scope and performance.

Singapore needs to re-orientate itself from a society that values paper credentials to one that respects skills and expertise in workers, and pays and promotes people with such skills accordingly.

The issue is on the mind of Education Minister Heng Swee Keat too. Even as Singapore ramps up tertiary education places, he has stressed that young people need to be persuaded to see the value of developing “deep skills” in a particular area of work instead of being qualifications-focused.

Some employers agree. If a polytechnic graduate in culinary science has the makings of a top chef, is he better off gaining further experience as a chef or heading immediately to a university to study hotel management or business, asked one.

But students and parents are practical. It is only when more employers, including the Government's own agencies, start to think likewise, that young people will invest more in acquiring relevant skills, and not place too much emphasis on credentials.

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