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Learning from each other

Singapore is keen to explore Switzerland's well-known vocational and apprenticeship schemes, and life-long learning programmes

BOTH Singapore and Switzerland have well-respected educational systems but with slightly different characteristics and fundamentals. This presents an opportunity for exchanges to occur.

Both countries have been actively pursuing these opportunities and leveraging on each other's respective strengths to enhance their educational programmes. For example, Singapore has been keen to learn from Switzerland's well-known vocational and apprenticeship schemes.

Switzerland has strong cantonal and independent career guidance centres with their own mission, strategy and budget. To leverage on this, a delegation from Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) went on a study trip to Switzerland in January this year.

Aimed at understanding in-depth the educational and career guidance systems in Switzerland, as well as the coordination between industry needs and education strategies, the delegation visited different institutions and career counselling centres.

In addition, Singapore's Institute of Technical Education (ITE) in preparation for its plan to offer five new "place-and-train" diploma programmes for fresh graduates, with overseas partners starting from 2016, also visited a few vocational schools in Switzerland to identify those with whom they can partner to offer a new diploma-level course in pastry and baking.

In that context, Swissnex Singapore, a platform of the Swiss Embassy dedicated to science, education and innovation, has been connecting ITE with the Richemont Centre of Excellence in Lucerne and the various providers of vocational education and training in the canton of Zug.

More recently, in May, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam led an important delegation to Switzerland from the SkillsFuture Secretariat, a recently launched initiative focusing on life-long learning and skills-based education.

Switzerland has a long history of a successful vocational education and apprenticeship schemes, so Singapore is looking at studying the partnership between education providers and industries.

The trip was focused on studying the models used in promoting continuing education and industry-relevant training. Switzerland has a long history of a successful vocational education and apprenticeship schemes, so Singapore is looking at studying the partnership between education providers and industries.

It is also keen to understand how Switzerland creates a more flexible and fluid system of education and training for working adults and learning about how it can enhance the quality of adult education.

"One of the key observations about Switzerland is that the Swiss have a deep appreciation of hands-on and practical experience, as part of their economy and culture," said a SkillsFuture Secretariat spokeswoman.

Another key feature is that the vocational pathway, which blends academic and practical learning, is pursued by the majority of Swiss youth and is seen as a desirable route to a successful career, she noted.

Meanwhile, those from the vocational track also have options to further their education, such as via the universities of applied sciences, and this addresses rising aspirations for a degree, while maintaining a strong focus on practical application and relevance to the labour market. This permeability allows students, throughout the Swiss system, to adapt their pathway and switch from a practice-oriented to a more academic programme and avoid the risk of dead-ends.

The delegation also discovered the successful collaboration between the different institutional partners and actors in a public-private partnership. "The vocational education and training system in Switzerland is very special because of the involvement of the government 'confederation', the cantons, vocational schools and companies. Within certain rules, guidelines and limits, all these players have space for innovation, development and creativity, according to the needs and requirements of the markets," explained Bruno Geiger, entrepreneur and project manager from the Office for Vocational Education, canton of Zug.

"Singapore's system shares some similarities with the Swiss system, where we have strengthened applied education in the polytechnics and ITE to ensure that our students remain employable, with specialised knowledge and relevant skills. We have also developed options and opportunities for them to upgrade during their working careers," the spokeswoman said.

She pointed out for example, how the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (UniSIM) are spearheading the applied degree pathway. Singapore's universities and polytechnics are also rolling out skills-based modular courses which allow graduates to customise their learning pathways and select courses most suited to their learning needs over time, at their own pace, without needing to commit to a fixed programme of study.

"In Switzerland, we noticed strong involvement by companies in driving training and manpower development. In addition to the strong cultural proclivity mentioned above, we were also shown evidence suggesting that apprentices do become productive over time, resulting in an overall net benefit to companies investing in training," the spokeswoman said.

She also noted how companies were willing to train workers as their focus was to collectively uplift the skills level for the entire industry in the long run. This, together with a strong element of social responsibility, spurs collaborative efforts among companies in terms of investment in skills and human capital. For instance, it is common for companies to set up shared training facilities and co-develop training programmes.

Another feature occasionally observed in the Swiss system is the use of third party organisations acting as intermediaries between companies, apprentices and education institutions to facilitate industry-relevant training. These companies, established over the last 15 years, promote, select, employ and coach the young professionals during the apprenticeship of three or four years throughout school-based as well as work-based training. They are also particularly useful for small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) with limited resources, as they help to alleviate the administrative load associated with the hiring of apprentices. This also allows SMEs to focus on training delivery yet giving them access to a pipeline of skilled workers who can be potential hires.

In conclusion, the SkillsFuture Secretariat spokesman added: "Singapore recognises Switzerland's strength in providing structured workplace training, and our post-secondary education institutions have on-going collaboration with Swiss companies to benefit from their expertise."

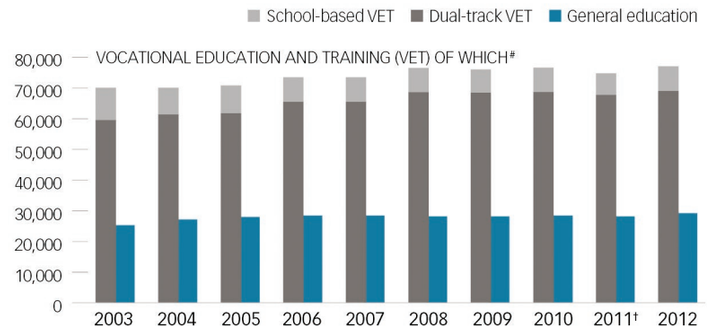
However, the interest in educational exchanges and collaboration is not only from the Singapore side but also from the Swiss side. Among others, a delegation of 22 directors and professors from Swiss universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education visited Singaporean educational and research institutions in October 2014.

Meanwhile, the Cantonal Office for Vocational Education and Training of Zug has already planned a visit to Singapore in the third quarter of this year to pursue discussions on cooperation with Singapore institutions.

The canton of Zug is home to a number of global companies and this is the reason why a unique apprenticeship in English was developed. The canton's goal now is to provide its students with global exposure, hence the interest to organise exchanges with institutions abroad.

Taking the vocational pathway

Enrolment in upper-secondary level*



** Federal Statistical Office (2014) # Including commercial and IT schools, excluding informal two-year apprenticeships † Excluding canton Ticino*

Source: State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation SERI

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