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Headline: A skills-first Singapore needs a rethink of assessments, not just more certificates
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A skills-first S'pore needs a rethink of assessments, not just more certificates

As we double down on skills, training must lead to competence or constructive feedback. Redesigning assessments can raise standards.

May Lim Sok Mui

Debates about exams and assessments in Singapore tend to focus on primary and secondary schools.

Rarely do they consider adult learners.

Yet as the nation places greater emphasis on skills over credentials when it comes to employment, it is critical that those skills are meaningfully demonstrated and verified.

Assessment therefore serves an important function for mid-career workers.

To ensure that our Continuing Education and Training (CET) landscape remains robust, we need to raise the bar on our assessment frameworks, to ensure that we certify the skills required in a competitive global economy.

Current assessments frequently fail to generate robust data on actual skills gaps or performance. For employers, this creates uncertainty about whether a "pass" truly reflects competence or merely course completion.

Yet assessments for adult learners should not just replicate the high-pressure culture of comparison and fear faced by younger students – particularly for those already balancing family responsibilities, ageing parents and shifting workplace demands. Nor is the answer to dilute standards through "assessment-lite" approaches.

What we need are assessments that set clear expectations, reflect real work, and give learners feedback and more than one chance to prove themselves.

CHALLENGES WITH CURRENT SET-UP

Unlike pre-employment training at schools, institutes and universities, which have clear progression rules and prerequisites, CET runs largely on self-enrolment.

A freshman cannot take a final-year module without prior grounding; in CET, however, adult learners often decide for themselves which course fits their level and goals.

That places a heavy cognitive burden on individuals, especially mid-career workers navigating unfamiliar domains.

For self-enrolment to work well, learners need credible ways to understand where they stand, what they are ready for and which courses will stretch them without overwhelming them.

Robust, accessible skills assessments can help learners navigate the options, pick the right entry point and improve returns on both effort and investment.

Signalling also matters. Under the current SkillsFuture movement, eligibility for course fee subsidies typically requires meeting attendance thresholds and passing training provider-run assessments.

When subsidies hinge on attendance plus a pass, some providers face pressure to ensure more trainees pass – sometimes by teaching narrowly to the test or relying on assessments that are not robustly standards-based. The result is noisy credentials that employers hesitate to trust.

For example, design thinking and UX or user experience credentials are now abundant. Many courses tend to assess learners through polished slide decks or template-driven exercises or even quizzes rather than observing how they engage users, test assumptions or iterate based on feedback.

The result is a surplus of certificates that signal familiarity with tools, but not the messy, judgment-heavy work of real design outcomes.

Employers increasingly ask to see portfolios instead of certification.

The recent Budget announcement to merge SkillsFuture Singapore and Workforce Singapore into a single statutory board reflects a move towards a more integrated, outcomes-driven workforce system where there is potential for skills acquisition, assessment and employment to align more tightly.

This presents a timely opportunity to raise hard questions about how learning is assessed and what meaningful progress truly looks like.

Should funding be decoupled from passing assessments? Should assessments be criterion-referenced and authentic, aligned to real workplace tasks, with transparent rubrics and appropriate mechanisms to protect standards?

And are we prepared to accept a CET system in which not everyone passes, even if they attend all lessons and try their best?

EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Assessment must differentiate outcomes. But they must also be designed to give useful feedback and allow people to show improvement over time, so that effort is recognised while standards remain high.

How do we keep standards firm while keeping pathways open, motivating and manageable for mid-career workers?

A well-constructed assessment can lead to smarter choices in terms of selecting roles, training pathways and development opportunities based on demonstrated skills and readiness. This ensures individuals and organisations invest their time and resources where they will have the greatest impact.

For the overconfident, evidence-based feedback surfaces concrete gaps. For the underconfident, external validation builds the confidence to step up.

For example, a customer service officer might complete a short scenario-based assessment where they draft a response to an upset "client" within a given time. The tool shows how clearly they have communicated, how well they de-escalated the given issue, and whether they applied the protocol correctly.

Without effective assessment feedback, someone who is overconfident might miss key steps they thought they had mastered; someone underconfident may produce an excellent response without realising they had already met the standard.

Practical tasks, structured work samples and validated rubrics can reduce hiring mismatches, speed up onboarding and widen opportunities for non-traditional candidates. But they can also create pressure if employers treat assessments as hard filters rather than developmental signals.

That is why assessments must also be designed – and used – as tools for transparency rather than exclusion. If a candidate passes with partial gaps, the assessment should highlight exactly where targeted training, mentoring or workplace support can help them succeed.

As for skills gaps, standards-based skills assessment breaks performance into observable components, showing which specific skills need strengthening.

At the system level, these skills assessments give employers and learners a clear, trustworthy sense of what someone can actually do – not just what they know.

Regular checks also help show whether a person's skills are still up to date, rather than relying on something they learnt years ago. This protects the value of our credentials and supports fairer decisions on pay and career progression.

RAISING STANDARDS WITHOUT RAISING FEAR

With good design, we can keep assessments from becoming an arms race and position them as a shared map for growth – for both employers and candidates.

Weak assessments erode trust. When bars are set too low or tests are disconnected from real work, signals blur for employers and learners alike.

But raising the bar does not have to mean raising the stakes if the assessment is designed as a bridge to competency rather than a trap for failure.

Rather, it means assessments that use tasks and criteria which mirror actual job demands, while replacing one-off verdicts with feedback and opportunities to re-demonstrate.

In terms of lifelong learning, it would help recast assessment from childhood memories of exams that were a source of dread, into a driver of growth – a mirror we consult regularly to get better at the work that matters.

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With good design, we can keep assessments from becoming an arms race and position them as a shared map for growth for employers and candidates, says the writer. Raising the bar does not have to mean raising the stakes if the assessment is designed as a bridge to competency rather than a trap for failure. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI