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European lessons for S'pore's apprenticeship system



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BY NG JING YNG - JULY 28

“Practice, practice and more practice” — this was how a museum guide described artist Vincent Van Gogh’s life during a recent visit to the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands.

It was aptly put, especially for a man who painted multiple versions of his renowned sunflower piece and 35 self-portraits — all in the name of perfecting his art.

But Van Gogh was not always this talented. His artistic flair was honed after decades of practice. He used a perspective frame for years to improve his sense of artistic proportion. He also repeatedly painted flower still lifes to handle colours better.

Similarly, this idea of acquiring a skill through constant practice is what an apprenticeship aims to do.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Applied Study in Polytechnics and Institute of Technical Education Review (ASPIRE) committee is now trying to instil this belief in Singapore. In recent months, MOE officials and ASPIRE committee members visited European cities to study different apprenticeship and vocational systems.

Travelling with them, I saw how a high regard for skills benefits a society economically and creates a range of interesting career options. Singapore can definitely do more in schools, workplaces and society to raise the value of skills and skills training.

LEARNING FROM THE EUROPEANS

In Germany and Switzerland, about 60 per cent of each school cohort opts for the apprenticeship route. Students cite the attraction of gaining skills while studying, which increases their employability after graduation.

Over their two to four years in vocational school, they could be working for three days and studying for two days. This work-study approach reinforces their skills and knowledge.

In Singapore, our polytechnics and ITEs have internships. But this is not compulsory across all courses and employers have said that the internship length — between one and six months — is too short.

There is also the ITE traineeship scheme, which mirrors the European work-study arrangement. This option, however, suffers from both low take-up and high attrition rates. Employers also felt the students are too young to assimilate into the workplace.

Looking at the European examples, it is perhaps time to move from an internship to an apprenticeship system for ITEs and polytechnics. The difference is that apprentices acquire deep skills and perform meaningful tasks in the workplace.

What can we learn from the Europeans on this?

First, close collaboration between schools and companies is needed in setting up a strong mentoring system. Employers should also participate in the selection process for better matching of students with companies.

In German companies, apprentices generally undergo an interview with trainers to assess their interests and skills. Full-time staff members are then assigned to train and provide regular feedback to apprentices. These mentors also liaise with school teachers to track the students' progress. Apprentices interviewed said tapping the knowledge of experienced craftsmen enriches their learning and eases their transition to the workplace.

Second, setting quality standards for apprenticeships will raise the prestige of skills training and ensure that students are being trained properly.

In Holland, companies accepting apprentices are accredited by organisations representing each sector. These accredited firms comply by having a workplace mentor and meeting stipulated training goals. In turn, they receive grants of up to €2,500 (S\$4,200) a year for each apprentice. Employers are able to design better apprenticeship programmes with training guidelines. Smaller firms can also use the subsidies to offset training costs.

If such incentives are available here, companies could use the funds for outreach purposes. For instance, German and Swiss companies have two-day internships for students to get a feel for the industry. Some have even built smaller workbenches for the younger ones. Parents and students said this helped them to learn about different occupations and create acceptance of skilled jobs.

PROMOTING APPRENTICESHIP

As a society, we can do more to promote the importance of skills. Singapore companies such as CKE Manufacturing view internships as apprenticeships, investing in mentors and designing meaningful tasks for interns. Their practices should be commended publicly, so that others can learn and contribute to an apprenticeship culture here.

Human resource experts have called on the public sector — as Singapore's largest employer — to take the lead in signalling that skills beyond paper qualifications are valued. While there seems to be more non-degree officers rising through the ranks, the Civil Service could be more transparent on how it rewards non-academic skills and experience.

Private firms can also play their part. In Germany and Switzerland, companies hold open houses and take part in career fairs where vocational students can find out about advancement pathways. Such openness assures parents and youths that there are opportunities in the vocational route.

Singaporean academic Lynn Lim from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland explained that the popularity of the Swiss vocational path “starts from the recognition of graduates and the provision of equal employment opportunities ... by local firms, multinational firms and more significantly the governmental or public sector”.

“(This) eventually makes the society and families realise that a youth is provided with a recognised path of learning and opportunity, which is not offered only to those who go to the traditional academic route of education,” she said.

There is also value in considering the proposal by former Singapore Workforce Development Agency chief executive Ong Ye Kung to codify the knowledge and skills to maintain standards in the industry. In Western countries, there is codification to set rules on how things should be done, down to the smallest details such as cutting carrots.

Mr Ong also suggested forming professional associations or guilds to instil professional pride within the trade and promote continual education.

Singaporean Georgina Zoss-Koh, who lives with her family in Zurich, admires the Swiss apprenticeship system, citing as an example how gardening apprentices learn to trim plants and acquire theories on plant varieties as well. Upon completing their apprenticeships, “the kids can take on the jobs immediately, without having to train them from scratch”, she said.

“We have a bunch of scholars in Singapore, but how many can speak of hands-on experiences and how many can take on a job after graduation without ... training?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ng Jing Yng is an education beat reporter with TODAY.

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