



# Effective Education for Employment: Singapore Interview Series

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## Introduction

The following interviews took place in July 2009.

Participants were asked questions relating to the themes of the Effective Education for Employment project, namely: the disconnect between the demands of employers and the output of our current education systems, the implications of a rapidly globalizing world, and what needs to happen to deliver fit for purpose education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Singapore is often cited as the most business-friendly economy in the world, with a highly skilled workforce. However, Singapore still faces numerous educational challenges, among them making the transition from a manufacturing to a service sector economy, as well as providing effective training for tens of thousands of foreign blue-collared workers from around the world.

While all participants were proud of their country's reputation for educational innovation and the flexible approach Singapore takes to educational design and delivery, how to build on this legacy is still very much open for debate. Edexcel International/Pearson are keen to continue debate around the important issues raised in this document. If you would like to find out more about Effective Education for Employment or contribute your views, please visit the dedicated website [www.eee-edexcel.com](http://www.eee-edexcel.com).



# The Interviews

# Zee Yoong Kang

CEO, NTVC Learning Hub

## Zee Yoong Kang explains the importance of generic skills, working with employers, and the challenges facing Singapore in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

As CEO of the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) Learning Hub, Zee Yoong Kang is at the head of the largest training provider in Singapore. The NTUC traditionally operated within the sphere of industrial relations. Increasingly, they see themselves playing an active role in adult education and, in particular, skills development. Learning Hub – set up in 2004 out of the NTUC Computer Training Centre – has so far trained over 400,000 individuals, mainly adult learners, and offers specific courses in, amongst other things, soft skills and employability. Zee Yoong Kang also holds the post of Director of NTUC's Employability Enhancement Department, which coordinates Singapore's Job Re-creation Programme.



### The challenges of re-skilling

We begin by talking about the current workforce dynamics in Singapore which throw up a set of challenges very different to many other economies. "Singaporean kids get a world class education, and we produce 25,000 graduates every year. The economy generates 250,000 new jobs every year. So our real challenge is in retraining the adult workforce to fill those jobs." He explains that the government in Singapore has invested heavily in retraining programmes. "The challenge is around moving from a manufacturing to a service sector economy." They are achieving this through heavy subsidies to support Singaporean residents with 90 per cent of the costs of retraining typically covered by public funds.

There is also a growing market in preparing foreign workers for the Singaporean workforce with training in things like health and safety being a necessary step for many immigrants who look to secure a work permit. Beyond this, Zee sees a gradual increase in the need for retraining these workers in what he calls "basic skills". He defines these as "reading, writing and speaking properly". The work of the NTUC Learning Hub is interesting in that it deals very much in 'filling in' what other education fails to provide and is specifically focussed on the skills that are required for, or are applicable to the work environment.

### Building 'generic skills'

Our conversation shifts towards the issue of what Zee calls 'generic skills' (soft or employability skills). He believes in the importance of these skills – Learning Hub runs specific courses in both soft skills and

employability – but he sees Singapore as some way off meeting the challenge. “There is formal course content which is approved and regulated by the Workforce Development Agency on developing ‘generic skills’, but we need more quality control.” He goes further: “Generic skills, behaviours, mindset change – all these things are talked about a lot but not a lot of action has actually taken place on this. These skills do not permeate the education system and there is general consensus that this is a problem.”

Having said that, he does believe that change is happening, and happening in the right place. “When I look at the education my children are getting, they have a lot more focus on project work, presentations.” This, he thinks, is a very positive sign for the future of the Singaporean workforce. He talks about the broader education system in Singapore and the gradual move away from a purely academic model that began in the 1990s. He pinpoints the ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ initiative as a key turning point. “The focus is on team skills, communication. Students are now much more well rounded. We’re starting to see the fruit of changes in education. We realised we couldn’t out-study the Chinese and Indians so we needed to develop a new speciality, a new focus for education.” This greater focus on skills, experiential learning and curriculum relevance is in the early stages but is hugely promising and may even provide a model for education around the world.

*/// We want academic freedom in a controlled way. ///*

### **Working with employers**

As part of the National Trade Union, the interface between education and industry lies at the heart of Zee’s day-to-day activities. He believes passionately in the need for business to feed into the development and delivery of training and education. Around 90 per cent of Learning Hub’s training services are sold directly to businesses so this gives the organisation unique access to industry feedback. “There must be a governing council from industry that approves skills taught within the National Curriculum. This happens in Australia. However, it’s very difficult to carry out in practice.”

The current model in Singapore – where courses have to be designed (and are approved) according to the guidelines set by government – mitigates against a more flexible, reactive system that can accommodate continuous feedback from industry and that supports the individual tailoring of course content to specific employers. Although this system does rely, in part, on consultation with industry, Zee points out that “Government secretaries can only make changes once every quarter which is not responsive enough to industry’s needs.”

He suggests an alternative model that, he believes, would address the issue of relevance without compromising on quality. “Rather than using traditional skills councils, build up a smaller credible body of industry representatives who would not slow down the market. We should stop imposing a curriculum but have more quality control over providers; basically, an accredited free market similar to the UK model.” He concludes: “We want academic freedom in a controlled way.”

### **A global standard**

We finish our conversation by thinking about the global situation, in light of the modern day large turnover of employees. There are challenges around the fact that employers only want to train for their immediate/ specific corporate needs. In Zee’s view, generic skills are not very

interesting to employers as they have little to gain from providing this training if the employee then moves to a different job.

He cites the Philippines as an example of how rapid expansion in the provision of education can lead to a drop in quality control. There was, he says, "...too much emphasis on bits of paper, not enough on the content of education". The way forward, he believes, is to build an international consensus around working towards "a range of education standards that are globally recognized". This would serve not only the individuals who spend time and money on their education, but also businesses which would reap the rewards of quality assurance through rigorous policing of these standards.

# Dr John Vong

Deputy CEO, Sacombank Vietnam



## Dr. John Vong discusses university education, approaches to teaching and how we can prepare young people for the world of work

Dr John Vong is well-placed to talk about the challenges of education. His career so far has seen him occupy an eclectic and varied range of roles that have taken him all over the world. He has worked in over sixteen countries, of which twelve are in Asia, and boasts a depth of experience in training, education, banking and international development. He contributed to the signing of an agreement that brought the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to Singapore as part of the Nanyang Fellows Programme, and has worked extensively with government ministries and state agencies on training, education and labour policies in emerging economies. As a consultant with the United Nations Development Programme and Asian Development Bank projects he facilitated the human resource development process in the governments of East Timor, Vietnam, Laos and Indonesia. He is now based in Vietnam and held the position of Senior Resident Adviser to the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) and was assigned to the Saigon Thuong Tin Bank (or Sacombank, of which IFC is a shareholder) and now serving as its Deputy CEO.

### The challenges of university education

Beyond his professional life, his own experiences in education have had a profound effect on his personal development. "I have seen my own life transformed from a street kid to senior adviser for development organisations, which was purely down to education", he says. His tertiary education taken in the UK and Malaysia and later in Australia and US, and his experiences within different education systems have made him question the way things are done. He believes currently that too many people with degrees are unemployable, particularly in emerging nations. He pinpoints a number of key issues, the responsibility for funding is one. "The 'consumers' of graduates [by which he means employers] must contribute to educational funding. Education must be a public/private partnership and business must be involved."

Furthermore, he identifies significant issues with the approach currently adopted in 'top' universities across the world. He believes there is an over-emphasis on the writing of "unintelligible academic essays" and that this impacts negatively on teaching skills. He goes further: "We need to change the key performance indicators for university professors who are now rewarded significantly more for research papers published than for quality of teaching, to the detriment of teaching quality." He suggests that the emphasis needs to shift towards a situation where teaching is valued on an equal footing with research and where there

is greater acknowledgement of the impact higher education has on the career prospects of graduates.

### **Methods of teaching**

We talk more specifically about the way in which education is delivered. "The quality of teaching in emerging countries is tremendously uninteresting." He concludes "It's just chalk and talk." He argues strongly for a need to "distil creativity into teaching". He also sees significant value in the idea of using simulations to teach, particularly within a vocational context. "If you want to learn branch banking, let's build a simulated bank branch." This kind of approach would provide a valuable antidote to chalk and talk and would begin to create a more stimulating and relevant learning experience.

### **Preparing for work**

Our conversation moves on to the role education plays in developing individuals for the workplace. There are, Dr Vong believes, some core attributes that need to be embedded into education at every level. "Everybody must be taught communication skills, writing and speaking, in whatever discipline they study". Beyond this, there should be greater emphasis on developing "determination and discipline, although these things can be influenced and mentored but not taught". The approach should be integrated: "These types of core skills need to be woven into the design of education, not as an add-on."

There should also be a much greater focus on advice and support around career pathways. "We shouldn't force kids to specialise in their studies too early. Certain students know what they want to do, but for those who don't, you need to provide career counselling. A career path, based on the employment environment of the country, should be mapped out before tertiary education which would enable the necessary mapping of needed skills and behaviours, thus making education more vocational." Dr Vong also highlights the need to communicate the realities of working life to individual students in order to help them make the transition between education and employment. "You have to manage the expectations of graduates so that they understand the necessary skills and behaviours and related difficulties of doing a job."

### **Employer engagement**

We finish by talking about the role employers can play. Against the backdrop of the global economic crisis, and within the context of changing employment realities where job or even career moves are increasingly frequent, employers are wary of investing in training, due to a focus on short-term results. Dr Vong has some suggestions for addressing this issue. "You need to think about new ways of doing things. Why not have contracts between employers and employees which require staff to return fees for any education paid for by their employer if they switch companies before a certain period of time?" Another approach would be to place the onus on the recipient employer: "You put a system in place that requires one company to compensate another for the training costs invested in the staff joining a company."

Part of the problem for employers is that companies don't understand or are unable to quantify the long-term benefits of investment in training and education. "Employers don't know how to measure return on

*/// Distil creativity into teaching. ///*

education; you need to tie in jobs to training after linking training to KPIs.”

Although he is positive about the future, he concludes that action is needed. “It’s time for a change. We need to focus on circulating best practice through developing pilot projects. Then based on the success of the pilots, we need to scale these up.”

# Professor Graeme Britton

Dean of Science & Technology at the Raffles Education Corporation



## Professor Graeme Britton describes his approach to developing creativity and reflects on the issues around transition from education to employment and the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning

As part of his role as Dean of Science & Technology at the Raffles Education Corporation in Singapore, Professor Graeme Britton works across the Asia-Pacific region. The Corporation is a private tertiary education provider running 26 colleges in 10 countries and is worth around \$1+ billion, making it the largest company of its type in the region. Their programmes began with a particular focus on the design sector but have moved into business and science and technology qualifications in recent years. The company currently teaches around 40,000 students globally and focuses mainly on diploma and degree courses for school-leavers.

Professor Britton describes Raffles Education as “a vocational institution” and makes the point that “as governments want more economic value from education, universities and higher education are focussing more and more on developing talent for professions”. He also makes the point that, in Asia, “people don’t go into education to learn, they go to get the knowledge they need to get a job.”

### Developing creativity

Fashion Design is one of the flagship programmes run by Raffles Education. Talking about the way in which this programme is delivered gives a good insight into how Professor Britton believes education should respond to current economic and workforce challenges. “The programme blends theory with the practical side – we make sure students are given all the practical tools they need to prosper in the industry. The focus is the production of a portfolio.” He talks about the onus being on developing “deep skills in the trade”. This is achieved, in part, through the involvement of practitioners in both the design and the delivery of courses. “You need experienced fashion designers working with students: a good practitioner can develop practitioner-based courses.”

Beyond the practical, there is also significant emphasis on the creative. “The students are given training in the necessary techniques first and then encouraged to develop their own style.” The design studio environment provides students with the right opportunities for reflective learning and the opportunity to develop what he calls “implicit knowledge. There is a lot of knowledge you can’t write down in a book. Getting across the knowledge that you can’t express only happens with a mentor in a design studio”.

*Both experiential and active learning are the way forward.*

## Connecting education and employment

The interface between education and employment is absolutely essential to the success of the Raffles programme. Professor Britton gives an example of how this works in practice: “We have arrangements with department stores in Singapore so that these stores display clothes from the final year shows in their windows. We also recently had Miss Singapore Universe 2009 wearing a dress designed by one of our students.” Bringing the competition that exists in the marketplace into the learning environment really helps the students get a sense of the real world and gain exposure to the climate of business that they will face when they finish their tertiary studies.

Work placements are also essential to the successful development of ‘job-ready’ students. “The majority of our students undergo a minimum 3 month internship as part of their course. This is a vital part of their education.”

In building stronger and more meaningful connections between business and education, Professor Britton points to the planning model currently operating in Singapore whereby the Government produces a projection of where they want to expand the economy and then ensures the education sector provides the manpower that is needed. This system is used to guide students into specific sectors via the education system. He believes that the higher education sector is responding to these difficult challenges: “Employers always want ‘job-ready’ graduates – this is unrealistic. Having said that, universities are becoming more vocational which is a good thing.” He pinpoints what he describes as the ‘liberal arts universities’ as providing a better, more rounded education with greater emphasis on the individual student. “At research universities, the pressure to publish papers often means the student plays second fiddle. At liberal arts universities, the interface with industry is there.”

## The future for learning

We conclude our discussion by focussing on the way forward for teaching. We talk about ‘experiential learning’ as being key, picking up on the vocationally-led approach of the Raffles fashion diploma. The other key idea we discuss is the concept of ‘active learning’. Professor Britton expands: “People have to be able to keep learning: they have to be active learners. Active learning means the individual taking responsibility for their life-long learning.” He strikes a note of caution, however. “Both experiential learning and active learning are the way forward. But cutbacks in funding increase class sizes and put both of these approaches at risk.”

And alongside the approach, it’s the people – the teachers – that are all important. “Teachers need to be exemplars for students. They have to be well prepared and allowed time for sabbatical or industrial leave. Prioritisation should not be on the academic knowledge of teachers but on their ability to teach.”

# Christine Lee

Head of Administration & Finance, Tyndale Education Group Singapore

## Christine Lee of the Tyndale Education Group in Singapore describes the role private education providers can play in up-skilling the Singaporean workforce

Tyndale Education Group launched in 1990 and has, over the last 20 years, been part of the significant growth in the private education sector in Singapore and the wider region. The marketplace they operate in now is both crowded and thriving. They offer students a United Kingdom-certified education and have partnerships with, amongst others, University of Sunderland, Sheffield Hallam University and University of Wolverhampton. Through their school in Singapore, and joint-venture schools in China, Vietnam and Myanmar, Tyndale students can study at every level of higher education from Foundation courses to MBAs. They are particularly recognised for their Engineering Studies faculty. Christine Lee is Head of Administration & Finance and also plays a key role in the recruitment of, and relations with, academic staff.



### Addressing workforce requirements

We begin by exploring the particular profile of the students Tyndale educates within the region. “We deal mainly with adult learners – those who are at least 18 years of age. Students with 12 years of education or ‘A’ Level or equivalent, could opt for the 3 years British university programmes. For students with Polytechnic Diploma or equivalent, we provide ‘top-up’ programmes to final year British university programmes with exemption from year 1 and year 2.” Much of their focus is on delivering broadly vocational qualifications to equip individuals – particularly immigrant workers – with the necessary skills and qualifications to work in the Singaporean economy. With universities in Singapore producing around 25,000 graduates a year and the economy creating upwards of 250,000 new jobs within the same period, the influx and training of foreign workers is a significant education paradigm in Singapore, as well as being big business. “Many foreign workers come here as technicians. They then need ‘higher education’ qualifications in order to up-grade and achieve promotion to ‘professional’ level. We provide these ‘higher education’ qualifications.”

The particular courses offered at Tyndale are very much in line with the strategic direction given by the Singaporean Government. Connection with industry is vital: “Government demands provide us with the rationale, so we follow those demands while, at the same time, seeking advice from industry. That’s how we develop our offering.” As a private company in what has become a very crowded marketplace, attracting students is also vital. And the key to this is showing a direct link between the education offered and potential employment: “We have to demonstrate that we can meet the needs of foreign students in terms of

whether courses offered will help them in their future. The key question is 'can I get a job after graduation?' At Tyndale, we train students to have strong analytical skills, creativity, practical ingenuity and good communication skills which coupled with flexibility will enable students to adapt to new fields and careers throughout life."

### Quality and relevance

The value of courses offered by Tyndale is, in part, assured by the accreditation process. It is a legal requirement that every course offered in Singapore is approved by the Ministry of Education. Equally, in order to rubber stamp the quality of the course, accreditation is also secured from one of Tyndale's UK education partners. Interestingly, the potential difficulties of satisfying two different accreditation processes are largely avoided. Christine explains how: "The Singaporean and British education systems are actually very similar. Consequently, we don't usually find there is any problem gaining formal course approval from both countries." Accreditation and formal course approval are extremely important to students as it provides insurance against paying for an education that turns out to be below standard or irrelevant. Furthermore, as many students struggle to meet the costs of their education, they need to know that they are not wasting their money.

*/// We try to make students aware of what is outside waiting for them. ///*

A focus on employability skills is also central. Particular focus is given to what Christine refers to as "common skills – these are the skills of communication, teamwork, managing tasks and solving problems, managing and developing self, applying technology, applying design and creativity." Specific common skills modules are a part of many of the courses offered. Beyond that, the mainly Singaporean teaching faculty are guided towards helping their students prepare for the world of work. Christine expands: "We try to make students aware of what is outside waiting for them." As they know that their success as an institution will ultimately be based around the professional success of their graduates, it's in their interests to retain this focus.

### The direction of travel

We conclude by discussing where education, across the board, can improve and where the focus of these improvements should be. We talk about the significant changes that have taken place at all levels of education in Singapore over recent years, something Christine describes as having "varying success". There is still too much of a focus on the old way of learning; "There should be a better balance between academic learning and soft skills," she suggests. She also believes education needs to embrace teaching approaches that are more relevant and applicable to the workplace: "The younger generation today need more career guidance, more training. And there should be more project based work within the curriculum – this will help develop independent thinking."

She notes that industry in Singapore is beginning to take soft skills training more seriously and points to both the propensity for companies now to have in-house soft skills training programmes and the funding mechanisms that are in place from government to support these initiatives. Thinking about the future of Singapore as a global human resource capital, she is cautiously positive. "Singapore has a very global outlook and its citizens are unique in the world in being bi-lingual with English as their first language, as all are trained in both English and Chinese or English and another official language."

