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Lifelong Learning through the SkillsFuture Movement in Singapore:

Challenges and Prospects

Abstract

This article examines the promotion of lifelong learning in Singapore through a new national initiative known as the SkillsFuture movement. It is argued that the attainment of lifelong learning is confronted with three key challenges, the first being the socio-cultural preference for academic rather than vocational education in Singapore. Secondly, there is an absence of a strong local lifelong learning culture that underscores the habits of mind needed for lifelong learning. The final challenge is the dominant ideology of pragmatism that potentially conflicts with the goal of the SkillsFuture movement for individuals to enjoy learning and pursue their passion. The article further recommends a reconceptualisation of the notion of lifelong learning in Singapore by supplementing the skills growth model with the individual development and social learning models. The Singapore example illustrates the difficulties and prospects of advocating lifelong learning due to historical and social-cultural conditions and practices.

Keywords: challenges, lifelong learning, prospects, Singapore, skills

Introduction

Although the concept of lifelong learning (hereinafter LLL) is not new, it is increasingly prized in our modern world that values human capital and talent development. Many governments and international organisations have introduced systems, initiatives and programmes in their quest to produce lifelong learners who are equipped to face the challenges in a globalised world (e.g. Edwards & Usher, 2001; Commission of the European Communities, 2001; Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001; Singh, 2002; World Bank, 2003; Unesco, 2004; European Commission, 2015). A case in point is the €7 billion Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) under the auspices of the European Commission that aims to enable people, at any stage of their life, to participate in education, training and stimulating learning experiences across Europe (European Commission, 2015). Beyond the Western world, countries in Asia such as Bangledesh, China, Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia have also put in place legislation and other measures to support adult and lifelong learning (Singh, 2002; Manzoor, 2014).

Although there is a growing body of literature on LLL in Asian societies (e.g. see Kumar, 2004; Leong, 2008; Wang, 2008; Han, 2008; Preece, 2009; Tam. 2012; Ng, 2013, Lee & Morris, 2016), the majority of the extant literature focuses on the European or Northern contexts (Preece, 2009). There is relatively limited research on the diverse interpretations of LLL in Asian contexts, and the tensions, potentials and outcomes that arise from the interplay between the policy intent of LLL on the one hand, and local political and

socio-cultural institutions, conditions, factors and actors on the other. This state of affairs is unfortunate as the concept of learning throughout one's life is not a 'Western' concept. Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako and Mauch (2001) rightly note that "African, Asian and Arabic cultures have all emphasised vertical articulation, or the need for people to learn continuously from childhood to adulthood, as individuals and societies change" (p. 4; for a discussion of LLL from a Confucian perspective, see Zhang, 2008). While it is difficult to generalise the similarities and differences between the Asian and Western concepts of LLL, given that much diversity exists even within 'Asian' and 'Western' countries, a notable convergence across these countries is the adoption of a neoliberal paradigm for LLL (Marshall, 1995; Lambeir, 2005; Olssen, 2006; Lee & Morris, 2016). Within a neoliberal discourse of LLL, knowledge has been replaced by skills and learning with an accent on process (Marshall, 1996).

Using Singapore as an illustrative case study, this article critically discusses the promotion of LLL in the nation-state through a new national initiative known as the SkillsFuture movement. By examining the aims and contents of the movement, the essay highlights the key challenges and prospects facing Singapore in its attempt to nurture lifelong learners. The article begins by introducing the concept of LLL, followed by a discussion of the propagation of LLL in Singapore through the SkillsFuture movement. The last part of the article spotlights on the main difficulties and recommendations for Singapore to achieve LLL.

Lifelong Learning (LLL)

This section seeks to provide a brief overview rather than a detailed literature review of the concept of LLL. Readers are encouraged to peruse the existing corpus of works on the genesis, evolution, interpretations and application of LLL (for a good review of the literature on LLL, see Aspin & Chapman, 2000; Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001; Green, 2006; Schuetze, 2006; Preece, 2009). In simple terms, LLL refers to "learning that is pursued throughout life: learning that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and in different places" (Lifelong Learning Council Queensland Inc, 2015, p. 1). In his literature review, Schuetze (2006) notes that the term 'lifelong learning' has changed from a predominantly idealistic and elusive social justice reform model to a more utilitarian, human capital based model. The goal of LLL is to improve ones' "knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" through all learning activity undertaken throughout life (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, p. 9). It is instructive that the European Commission goes beyond the employability/adaptability priority of LLL to encompass the desired outcomes of personal fulfilment, active citizenship and social inclusion (ibid.). A lifelong learner is an active and creative explorer of the world, a reflexive agent, a self-actualising agent, and an integrator of learning (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako & Mauch, 2001). LLL takes place not only within formal education (typically structured learning that leads to certification and provided by an education or training institution) but also non-formal and informal education as well. Non-formal learning refers to learning that is structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support, but is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). Informal learning, although similar to non-formal learning by not leading to certification, is unstructured and results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure (ibid.).

Despite the popularity and ubiquity of LLL as a global signifier, there is no consistent discourse on LLL (Mocker & Spear, 1982; Aspin & Chapman, 2000; Edwards & Usher, 2001; Coffield, 2000; Ng, 2013). Among the many conceptions of LLL are three models that are

most relevant to LLL in Singapore: the skills growth model, the personal developmental model, and the social learning model (Rees & Bartlett, 1999, cited in Coffield, 1999; for other models of and agendas for LLL, see Green, 2006; Schuetze, 2006). The *skills growth model* is linked to the human capital thesis that sees a correlation between upskilling and economic prosperity. Preece (2009) explains that this model is concerned with producing a more accredited, multi-skilled and nimble labour force in order to further economic progress. The *personal developmental model*, in contrast to the skills growth model, goes beyond material concerns and technical skills to include individual self-fulfilment in all spheres of life. Finally, the *social learning model* underlines the role of institutions of trust and cooperation as the means to bring about not just economic progress but also social equity. Combining the three models of LLL identified by Rees and Bartlett (1999) is the 'triadic' nature of LLL that integrates the aims of economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, as well as social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity (Aspin & Chapman, 2000; also see Chapman & Aspin, 1998). Also offering a holistic model of LLL are Power and Maclean (2011) who view LLL as "a basic human right for individual development and empowerment; a means to better employment prospects and higher income; a strategy for poverty alleviation or closing income gaps; an enabler for social benefits such as higher productivity and social capital; and the 'master key' for the achievement of national vision" (cited in Ng, 2013, p. 321). Against a backdrop of the varying conceptions of LLL, the next section examines the promotion of LLL in Singapore through a new and comprehensive initiative.

The SkillsFuture Movement

The state agenda for LLL is not a recent development in Singapore. For example, the Lifelong Learning Endowment Fund (LLEF) was introduced in Singapore more than a decade ago to facilitate "the acquisition of skills and expertise by persons, and the development and upgrading of skills and expertise of persons, to enhance their employability" (Attorney-General's Chambers, 2001, as cited in Ng, 2013, p. 322, also see Kumar, 2004; Lee & Morris, 2016). But what is new about the current furtherance of LLL in Singapore is the scope and extent of investment given by the state. Unlike past endeavours that largely aimed to train workers through ad-hoc programmes that are run on a relatively small budget, the SkillsFuture movement is an ambitious and nation-wide initiative that is open to all Singaporeans. That LLL is a central objective of the Singapore government is seen in the national budget allocated: it has been announced that the spending on continuing education and training will increase from about $600m per year over the last five years, to an average of over $1 billion per year from now to 2020 (Shanmugaratnam, 2015a).

The essence of the SkillsFuture movement, as denoted by the name, is about developing the skills relevant to the future. The aims of the SkillsFuture movement are spelt out and reiterated by a number of policymakers in their speeches. The Deputy Prime Minister, in a recent Budget speech, hails LLL as "our next phase of development" and "critical to our future" (Shanmugaratnam, 2015a). The aim of the SkillsFuture movement is as follows:

> It will develop the skills and mastery needed to take our economy to the next level. More fundamentally, it aims to empower each Singaporean to chart their own journey in life, and gain fulfilment at work and even in their senior years (ibid.).

The 'skills' in question refers to "the ability to apply knowledge in real-world situations that keep changing, develop deeper know-how through practice, collaborate well with others and look for opportunities in the face of challenges (Ministry of Manpower, 2015). The Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) outlines three big ideas for SkillsFuture: 'mastery', 'meritocracy', and 'you' (Ong, 2016). First, mastery refers to the desire to go beyond paper qualification to achieve a level of expertise so deep that "we can innovate, venture into new territoty, dream and invent" (ibid.). Complementing 'mastery' is 'meritocracy' where a diversity of achievements across all fields – from managers and Chief Operating Officers to artisans and craftsmen – are celebrated. Finally 'you' exhorts individuals to "pursue their interests, aspirations and passions" and achieve "self-discovery" (ibid.). An ideal lifelong learner, it follows, is one who "celebrates and values learning for the joy and sense of fulfilment that it brings, one where learning is an intrinsic part of daily life, and deeply entrenched in the social fabric" (Ong, 2015).

The advancement of LLL through the SkillsFuture movement is primarily driven by economic considerations. The Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) states that the movement was conceived "to respond to a changing world with changing demands for skills and knowledge" (Ong, 2015). Besides meeting the challenges of globalisation, the government is also concerned with the growing number of graduates who may lack the requisite skills to be employed and remain employable. Over the decades, the number of degree holders in Singapore has increased sharply: almost half of the residents in Singapore (52%) aged aged 25-34 had university degrees in 2014, as compared to only 7.2% in 1990 (Yeo, 2015). Although the overall proportion of underemployed graduates has remained low at around 2 per cent, the underemployment rates for the arts (9.3 per cent) and community, social and personal services (other than those categorised as health and social services) are relatively high (6.4 per cent) (Yng, 2015). Alerting Singaporeans to the problem of underemployment in Britain, the United States and China, the Prime Minister of Singapore cautions: "Singapore must avoid leading people up the wrong path, misleading them that if you spend three years of your life doing this, at the end you will have a happy outcome" (cited in Davie, 2012).

A spread of programmes and initiatives has been planned under the SkillsFuture movement for all Singaporeans, including students, employees, employers, training providers and adult educators. Collectively, the programmes and initiatives aspire to achieve the following four thrusts (Government of Singapore, 2015):

- Help individuals make well-informed choices in education, training and careers;
- Develop an integrated high-quality system of education and training that responds to constantly evolving needs;
- Promote employer recognition and career development based on skills and mastery; and
- Foster a culture that supports and celebrates LLL.

First, to achieve the goal of helping students make well-informed choices in education, training and careers, all students will receive education and career guidance to assist them in knowing the various options and making informed choices about their future (Shanmugaratnam, 2015a). To this end, a professional core of Education and Career Counsellors with prior industry experience and knowledge will be developed for the public schools and Institutes of Higher Learning. The Institutes of Higher Learning, in the Singapore context, comprise the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), polytechnics and five publicly-funded universities (Ministry of Education, 2015a). Students in the ITE and the polytechnics will receive a total of 40-60 hours of curriculum where they are equipped with the requisite

skills for the workplace. Secondly, to develop an integrated high-quality system of education and training that responds to constantly evolving needs, students will be involved in deeper and more structured internship programmes that include international exposure, especially in Institutes of Higher Learning (Shanmugaratnam, 2015a). The target is to introduce enhanced internships in two-thirds of polytechnic courses and half of ITE courses over the next two years. In particular, extensive overseas programmes, hitherto available only to university students, will be open to students in the ITE and polytechnics via the Young Talent Programme (YTP). This means that students in the ITE and polytechnics will have the opportunities to be involved in international immersion programmes such as internships and work-study programmes that will increase their job prospects.

As for the third thrust of achieving employer recognition and career development based on skills and mastery, a new programme known as 'SkillsFuture Earn and Learn Programme' has been introduced (Shanmugaratnam, 2015a). Tailored for fresh graduates from the polytechnics and ITE, this programme matches the graduates with suitable employers so that the former will receive structured on-the-job training and mentorship, as well as study for an industry recognised qualification. The objective is for one-third of the polytechnic and ITE graduates to be involved in this programme. Finally, as part of the effort to foster a culture that endorses LLL, a 'SkillsFuture Credit' initiative has been implemented from January 2016. The Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) explains that the SkillsFuture Credit is "not meant to be just a monetary grant, but is also a clear signal that each of us is empowered and needs to take charge of our own skills" (cited in Ang, 2015). This initiative gives all Singaporeans aged 25 and above an opening credit of S$500 that can be used to pay for a wide range of approved skills-related courses. It has been announced that as many as 10,000 courses, ranging from financial literacy to photography, cooking and learning of a foreign language, will be offered by more than 500 providers such as the Nanyang Technological University and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (ibid.).

Besides the above-mentioned core initiatives and programmes, the SkillsFuture movement also provides a variety of courses, platforms and resources for employees (early career and mid-career onwards), employers, training providers and adult educators. Examples are the 'Individual Learning Portfolio' (ILP) which is an online portal for Singaporeans to plan their education and training into their working life, and the P-Max which is a 'Place-and-Train' programme to match job-seeking Professionals, Managers and Executives (PMEs) to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (for details, see Government of Singapore, 2015).

Key Challenges

A number of challenges exist that vitiate the successful promotion of LLL through the SkillsFuture movement in Singapore. This article shall focus on three main challenges for reason of space. The first challenge is the *socio-cultural preference for academic rather than vocational education*. For the SkillsFuture initiative to succeed in Singapore, the country needs a paradigm shift in re-looking the overriding concern with paper qualification and seeing learning as merely a product. The Prime Minister of Singapore states:

Do not go on a paper chase for qualifications or degrees, especially if they are not relevant because pathways and opportunities to upgrade and to get better qualifications will remain open throughout your career. It is never the last chance. You always have the possibility to advance, to improve yourself, to take another step

as long as you are working, as long as your mind remains fresh and active and you dare to go (Lee, 2015).

Rather than merely focussing on paper qualification, Singaporeans are urged to acquire deep competencies throughout their careers by learning on the job and pursuing higher skills qualifications (ibid.). Reiterating the Prime Minister's message is the Deputy Prime Minister who calls on Singaporeans to "change the culture in education" by being "less obsessed by the grades they get and how finely we can differentiate one child from the other, and focus more on giving them diverse experiences" (Shanmugaratnam, 2015b). In tandem with the national purpose to shift from paper chase to skills mastery, the SkillsFuture movement states on its website, "Skills mastery is more than having the right paper qualifications and being good at what you do currently; it is a mindset of continually striving towards greater excellence through knowledge, application and experience" (Government of Singapore, 2015). The SkillsFuture Secretariat, in a letter published in a local newspaper, further reminds Singaporeans not to judge a person based solely on academic qualification but to "look beyond early qualifications and recognise that a whole set of skills matters in how well we do and what we contribute" (Ministry of Manpower, 2015). LLL, in order to succeed in Singapore, also requires Singaporeans to go beyond seeing learning solely as an outcome to viewing it as a process as well. A lifelong learner is one who is prepared to continuously (re)learn as part of "an ongoing permanent addition of competences and skills adapted continuously to real external needs" (Olssen, 2006, p. 22).

However, the reality is that the priority of many Singaporeans is on paper qualification, particularly a university degree. This point was acknowledged by the Prime Minister himself: "Every parent wants his or her child to do as well as possible, go to university. And many ITE (Institute of Technical Education) students hope to go on to the poly and most poly students aspire to get a degree" (cited in Davie, 2012). Consequently, many Singaporeans have been conditioned to measure the worth of learning based on its tangible outcome. A researcher observes that Singapore's fixation with academic qualification "has left some parents and students sceptical about the SkillsFuture scheme" as they "typically take the view that a degree is essential to career progression, and point to how a university graduate may earn twice as much in starting pay than those from the ITEs and polytechnics" (cited in ibid.). Aggravating the obsession with academic education/paper qualification in Singapore is a concomitant negative view of vocational education/skills acquisition. Such a perception has a historical basis: since Singapore's independence in 1965, only the academically able students, based on their performance in terminal exams, are admitted into elite schools and universities, leaving the vocational institutions to take in low-performing students. The rationale presumably is that the best and brightest will 'use their brains' to become leaders and thinkers whereas the weaker students will 'use their hands' to acquire the basic technical skills to earn a living. Consequently, vocational education, as well as 'skills', is not the preferred route for the population at large. In the eyes of most Singaporeans, 'mastery' is likely to mean content mastery of exam subjects while 'meritocracy' is narrowly defined as the opportunity to excel academically and obtain a place in a prestigious educational institution.

This pejorative view of vocational education is not unique to Singapore. Researchers have noted that vocational education has traditionally been subordinated to general academic studies in the Anglophone countries. Lewis (1991) claims that "whether in the developed or developing world … vocational education has been conceived as being unworthy of the elite, and more suited to the oppressed or unprivileged classes (p. 97, cited in Hager & Hyland,

2003, p. 272). Such a perception, as noted by Hager and Hyland (2003), is premised on the dichotomies inspired by the ancient Greeks: "body vs. mind, hand vs. hand, manual vs. mental, skills vs. knowledge, applied vs. pure, knowing how vs. knowing that, practice vs. theory, particular vs. general, and training vs. education" (p. 272). Winch and Gingell (2004) concur that vocational education is regarded as inferior due to the exaltation of factual and theoretical over practical education and experience. In the case of Singapore and other East Asian societies, the low status of vocational education stems not so much from the Greek heritage but primarily from the Confucian culture that exalts textual transmission and academic achievement (Tan, 2015, 2016). The aspiration of every parent in ancient China is for one's child to be a scholar who has aced the civil service exam rather than a craftsman who is unschooled. Xiong (2011), commenting on the cultural challenge in developing the higher vocational education in China, concludes that vocationalism that values skills and skilled workers is oppositional to the Confucian tradition that favours theoretical knowledge.

The second and related challenge for the successful promotion of LLL in Singapore is *a lack of a strong LLL culture that underscores not just skills but also the habits of mind needed for LLL.* Notwithstanding the heavy state investment in terms of infrastructure, systems, programmes and resources, what is just as important, if not more important than the 'hardware' is the 'heartware' or habits of mind. Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of multi-national companies (MNCs) have observed that Singapore employees generally are weak in attributes such as the drive to succeed and the willingness to try new things (Han, 2015). A director of corporate strategy of a training company asserts that "Singaporeans lack one key mindset, which is the appreciation of the need to learn-unlearn-relearn" (ibid.). Questioning that assumption that training itself is sufficient, La Belle (1982) contends that the acquisition of skills may not be the most important variable in occupational stratification as employers are just as interested in the cultural and socio-economic attributes of potential employees. A 2014 survey conducted with 150 Chief Financial Officers from Singapore by Human Resource consulting firm Robert Half shows that the most important factor to raise productivity of employees is "motivating employees" (54%), "improving training and development of employees" (40%) and "better adoption of technology" (25%) (Yeo, 2015). Responding to the survey findings, a director of corporate strategy of a training company draws our attention to the development of habits of mind such as creativity, adaptability, curiosity, the ability to handle diversity, cross-cultural collaboration etc. (Han, 2015).

A LLL culture is critical, given that historical, institutional and cultural contexts mediate and shape human behaviours (e.g. Wertsch, 1998, 2007; Wertsch & Rupert, 1993; Engeström, 1987, Engeström & Engeström, & Kerosuo, 2003; Daniels, 2010; Daniels et al., 2010). Daniels (2010), drawing upon Engeström's works, points out that broad institutional and societal frameworks and immediate social actions of individuals are mutually constitutive. La Belle (1982) highlights a tendency by programme planners to neglect socio-economic and ethnic dependency relationships that are integral to the smooth execution of programmes. In other words, these programme planners overlook the fact that individuals and institutions may not be united in working toward shared goals, that a community's economic and political resources and expertise are not always available to support job-training, and that relevant job opportunities may not be offered to employees so that they could meaningfully apply what they have learned (ibid.). In the case of Singapore, the 'SkillsFuture Earn and Learn Programme' was modelled after the apprenticeship programme in Germany and Switzerland – countries that have a long tradition of valuing skills mastery. Such a culture, where the people take pride in mastery of skills and are respected for their competence rather than mere paper qualification, is currently weak in Singapore. The function of culture in influencing the outcome of LLL is noted by the Deputy Prime Minister who comments that firms in

Germany, Japan and Sweden are at the frontier because of the people's deep mastery of skills (Shanmugaratnam, 2015b). He adds that the "culture we must aspire towards" is "taking pride in mastery and getting respect from customers and the public because you're the master of what you're doing (ibid.).

Related to the first two challenges is the final challenge that stems from the dominant ideology of pragmatism. Singaporeans as well as their leaders have been characterised as "pragmatic", "rational" and "instrumental" (Chua, 1997; Kumar, 2004; Tan, 2012; Bhaskaran et al., 2012; Lee & Morris, 2016). The ideology of pragmatism exhibits the following essential traits: "opposition to idealism, Utopianism and totalising approaches; its adaptive and mimicking nature; its focus on finding the technical means for achieving results that often lie beyond public reflection and criticism; and its disregard for intangible and unquantifiable values" (Tan, 2012, p. 71; also see Hill & Lian 1995; Gopinathan 2007; Tan, 2005, 2008; Koh, 2007; Tan, 2012). Scholars have maintained that "soft, qualitative evidence, principled arguments and concerns about the intangible" are eschewed in any public policy enquiry or debate (Tan, 2012, p. 81), and "'concrete' evidence of a statistical type" and "quantitative measures" are privileged (Chua, 1997, p. 70, cited in Tan, 2012, p. 81). Situated within a pragmatist climate, it is unsurprising that the SkillsFuture movement is arguably predicated on a skills growth model. As mentioned, this model associates LLL with the human capital thesis, training, skills upgrading and mastery, productivity and economic progress. That LLL is valued primarily for its employability and utilitarian value is alluded to in the statement that the SkillsFuture movement "will develop the skills and mastery needed to take our economy to the next level" (Shanmugaratnam, 2015a). The former Education Minister reinforces the economic imperative of LLL when he states that the SkillsFuture movement aspires to help Singaporeans to "stay on the top of change and excel at what you do, so that you can own a better future" (cited in Saad, 2015).

However, the prevailing ideology of pragmatism for Singapore potentially conflicts with the goal and direction of the SkillsFuture movement. The SkillsFuture initiative, as part of the government's aim to champion LLL, encourages Singaporeans to go beyond the tangible and quantifiable to find joy in learning and to pursue their passions and interests. As mentioned earlier, two big ideas for SkillsFuture are 'meritocracy' and 'you' (Ong, 2016). The former refers to an acceptance in a diversity of achievements across all fields whereas the latter spurs individuals on to pursue their interests, aspirations and passions in a journey of self-discovery. It has also been noted earlier that the ideal lifelong learner is one who values learning not just for its extrinisc and tangible rewards but also for its intrinsic worth; in the words of the Acting Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills), such as person "celebrates and values learning for the joy and sense of fulfilment that it brings" (Ong, 2015). But the social acceptance of the above two big ideas in Singapore requires, among other conditions, a re-definition of success that transcends economic, concrete and quantifiable considerations. It involves, for example, judging a person not based on one's paper qualification (or the lack of), job title, social status, earning power and utilitarian contribution to Singapore's economy. It necessitates a social recognition of the importance of living out one's aspirations and dreams *even if* they do not cumulate in measurable economic outcomes that benefit oneself and the nation. However the above mindset and lifestyle do not sit well with the ideology of pragmatism, with "its disregard for intangible and unquantifiable values" (Tan, 2012, p. 71). It should be added that the above critique of the ideology of pragmatism does not mean that this ideology is no longer relevant to Singapore. To be sure, a pragmatic ideology has been instrumental in bringing economic success, political stability and social cohesion to Singapore. Rather, the argument here is that this ideology that stresses realism, tangibles and quantifiable outcomes needs to be supplemented by a new ideology that

welcomes idealism, intengaibles and unquantifiable values. Otherwise, pragmatism may become a stumbling block to the SkillsFuture movement by perpetuating narrow definitions of meritocracy (merit derived from academic achievement) and success (encapsulated in the 5Cs: cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership).

Prospects

To address the above-mentioned challenges, it is recommended that the notion of LLL in Singapore be reconceptualised to balance the dominant skills growth model with the individual development and social learning models. The creation and sustenance of a LLL culture in Singapore require an integrated approach to LLL capabilities that involves not just training opportunities on craft mastery and other capabilities required to practise a vocation, but also a change in mindset towards education, skills, vocational training, and definitions of 'mastery', 'meritocracy', 'success' and 'the good life'. The learning, internalisation and practice of habits of mind for LLL such as open-mindedness, innovation and risk-taking should take place not only in a work context at a specific time, but in all social settings throughout one's life. A triadic nature of LLL is recommended that harmonises economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, and social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity (Aspin & Chapman, 2000). As part of the goal to move away from a skills-centric notion of LLL, more courses under the SkillsFuture Credit, for example, can be expanded to include learning experiences that are salutary for personal growth, such as values clarification, emotional intelligence and talent development. After all, these experiences are part and parcel of the "diverse experiences" mentioned by the Deputy Prime Minister as crucial for an innovative and creative society in Singapore; these diverse experiences, according to him, could take place in the sports field, in the dance hall, in debate, in outdoor adventure, and even during daydreaming (Shanmugaratnam, 2015b). It is noteworthy that researchers such as Jenkins and colleagues (2012) have foregrounded "the non-economic benefits of adult learning, including any intergenerational transfers of knowledge and 'love of learning'" as well as "a range of different definitions of lifelong learning in addition to learning which leads to qualifications" (p. 1).

It is also essential, for a LLL culture to take root in Singapore, to consider the interaction between societal frameworks and the agency exercised by social actors. Noting that the learning society is a global society of engagement, Olssen (2006) avers that the learner is "engaged in a process of action for change as part of a dialogic encounter rather than as a consequence of individual choice" (p. 225). It is imperative, therefore, to place a premium on building trust and cooperation which are values emphasised in the social learning model. Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako and Mauch (2001) observe that "[w]hile learning takes place at the individual level with the interplay of cognitive, emotional and physical elements, the learning process is very much shaped by the environment in which the learner finds himself/herself" (p. 20). In the same vein, La Belle (1982) posits that individuals are more likely to internalise and practise what they have learnt when the learning is infused into the lived experiences of the individuals. Evidently, societal discourses, affordances and constraints are embedded within the everyday activity of the individual and thus in their decision making. A practical strategy to capitalise on and bring together instituional, social and individual resources is the establishment of 'informal learning networks' where individuals could learn collaboratively by drawing upon the community's values, capital and wisdom. The government, on its part, could provide the necessary financial, logistical and manpower support through the SkillsFuture movement. An example is for community or religious leaders to organise events where Singaporeans could congregate to showcase, learn

about and share each other's talents, interests and mastery of skills. Through such communal interactions, exposure and experiences, a culture, built upon a spirit of collegiality, trust and love of learning, could be established and fortified in the long run. This outcome is in tandem with the aim of the SkillsFuture movement to foster "a culture of lifelong learning" that involves "an entire community to build this mindset", in the words of the Acting Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) (Ong, 2015).

Conclusion

This article has argued that the attainment of LLL via the SkillsFuture movement in Singapore is fraught with endemic challenges that stem from prevailing socio-cultural values and practices. It is argued that the attainment of LLL is hindered by the socio-cultural preference for academic rather than vocational education in Singapore. There is also a lack of a conductive cultural environment that underscores the habits of mind needed for LLL. Finally, the dominant ideology of pragmatism potentially conflicts with the goal of the SkillsFuture movement for individuals to enjoy learning and pursue their passion. Responding to these challenges, the article has recommended an expansion of the existing conception of LLL from a predominantly skills-growth orientation towards individual development and social learning.

Globalisation, with its accent on human capital and (re)creation of knowledge, has increased the value of skills mastery and vocational education and supported the skills-centric focus of LLL. But the emphasis on the skills growth model for LLL is a double-edged sword: it has also resulted, as evident in the case of Singapore, a conception of LLL that is predominantly confined to economic and vocationalist considerations at the expense of personal development and social learning. An economy-driven interpretation of LLL is not unique to Singapore and is in fact prevalent in other countries. Pointing out that economic competitiveness is the main driver for the vision for LLL, Preece (2009) informs us that the skills growth model of LLL is the most influential model in industry-focused countries in the world. But this economic and vocationalist conception of LLL has been criticised for being too narrow and functionalist. As noted by Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako and Mauch (2001), "The predominantly economic interpretation of lifelong learning in the last ten years, however, has become problematic for many educators and practitioners who have come forward with such terms as "Lifelong (L)Earning" and "Learning to Earn" as their succinct criticism of the way the term is being promoted" (p. 1). Such an understanding of LLL may marginalise the non-economic dimensions and benefits of LLL that are essential for the individual and collective well being of human beings. Furthermore, it neglects the existence of local socio-cultural factors that vitiate the implementation of LLL. The Singapore example adds to the existing literature on the difficulties and prospects arising from the mediating effects of prevailing social-cultural ideologies, presuppositions and practices.

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