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Aligning the Polytechnic Provision of CET with SkillsFuture: Meeting Learners' and Employers' Needs

*Research Bulletin 3: CET Educators'
Perceptions on Effective Continuing
Education and Training*

TEAM MEMBERS:

Stephen Billett¹, Anthony Leow², Shuyi Chua²,
Yew Kong Tan³, Sara Zaman³, and Anh Hai Le¹

¹ Griffith University, Australia, ² Republic Polytechnic, Singapore
and ³ Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore



Introduction to Project

The study, 'Aligning the polytechnic's provision of CET with SkillsFuture: Meeting learners' and employers' needs', captures the views of working-age Singaporeans on accessible and effective continuing education and training (CET). It consists of three phases. In the first phase, 180 recent graduates of CET programmes and 40 employers were interviewed and surveyed. In the second phase, 860 Singaporean working-age adults responded to an online survey. In the third phase, online workshops and webinars for CET lecturers were conducted to discuss the findings from the earlier phases. This third research bulletin reports findings from the third phase of the study.

Participants

From September to November 2021, six workshops and three webinars were conducted with CET educators and administrators enlisted from three sources. First, the Institute of Adult Learning (IAL) sent an Electronic Direct Mailer (EDM) to members of their Adult Educators' Network. Second, through Griffith University (GU), an EDM was sent to students who had graduated from the Master of Training and Development (MTD) programme and those who are currently enrolled in the Master of Learning and Professional Development (MLPD) programme. Third, an EDM was sent to all polytechnics in Singapore – Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NP), Temasek Polytechnic (TP), Republic Polytechnic (RP), Singapore Polytechnic (SP) and Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP). In total, 274 CET educators and administrators participated in these workshops and webinars.

Methodology

Each workshop commenced with a 20-minute presentation on the findings of Phases 1 and 2 of the study. Subsequently, the participants were given a worksheet with three questions and divided into groups where they discussed their answers to those questions. This worksheet was designed to elicit participants' responses to the findings. Thereafter, the bigger group reconvened to share their answers. For the webinars, the presentation of the findings of Phases 1 and 2 of the study was prefaced with a talk on workplace learning. Subsequently, the participants shared their perspectives on the findings. The sessions were recorded through Zoom. Thereafter the sessions were transcribed, and the data was analysed and organised into vignettes¹. These data were represented using vignettes as this illustration best suits the data that consist of the individual and collective stories from the participants.

¹ To safeguard the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms are used in these vignettes.

Findings

The following ten vignettes are composed based on the discussions of the CET educators and administrators over the nine sessions. They are short stories that capture defining details of the experiences of CET educators and administrators where they shared of their struggles and joys in their roles. Some of these vignettes capture an individual educator's story, while others are a composite of multiple stories. They provide a qualitative sense of key issues faced by CET educators and administrators today. The vignettes are categorised into five main themes/requests: (i) Support from employers, (ii) Support from administrators, (iii) Support for students before and after course, (iv) Coping with the new online education provisions, and (iv) Skills adult educators need today.

Support from Employers

Educators reported that support from employers and management can increase motivation of students. Vignette 1 describes how an educator was supported by the manager of a company who had engaged him by being personally involved in the learning progress and outcome of their staff training. Vignette 2 describes how an institution had supported an educator by providing financial support for his course fees.

Vignette 1 - Kelvin

Kelvin was teaching a CET course to a group of attendees from a company. Kelvin was surprised that on the first day of the training, the manager came and emphasised to his staff about the importance of the training. On the last day of the course, the manager also requested to personally hand out the certificates and congratulate each of his staff. Kelvin has never seen any manager so supportive of their staff training and noted that this endorsement was a strong factor why the students remained motivated throughout the course. Since that experience, he always encouraged managers to visibly support their staff training in one way or another.

Vignette 2 - Peter

Peter is an engineering lecturer at a polytechnic. When he requested to study for his Masters, his polytechnic paid for the programme and gave him a reduced workload. They also supported him in other CET programmes, often paying fully for them. Peter remained loyal to the polytechnic, working for over 15 years for them. He reported that his efforts were always recognised and appreciated by his management and there were ample opportunities to succeed and grow.

The two vignettes show how support from employers can come in different forms. It can be monetary, where the employer sponsors the course for their employees or through physical and verbal presence, where the employer explicitly communicates to their employees that they are supportive of their training and recognise their efforts to upgrade themselves. Either way, educators have reported that such support enhances the motivation and commitment of CET learners.

Support from Administrators

Educators reported that effective communication between administrators and educators ensures that the needs of both stakeholders are met. Educators told us that they want to be informed about the profiles of students and students' and employers' expectations, and to have a say about assessment criteria and mode of delivery. Vignettes 3 and 4 describe how educators were hindered in their roles when they could not obtain information about participants or had a list of challenging rules and regulations to abide by.

Vignette 3 – Wei Ling

Wei Ling works as an adult educator for a training institute. She was informed that she would be teaching marketing principles to a group of 20 students from a company for a one-day course. She tried to enquire more about the students' profiles and abilities, but the administration was unable to provide such information to her. At times, she reported feeling like a nuisance to be always asking administrative staff questions they seemed either unwilling or unable to entertain. On the day of the training, Wei Ling was surprised that many students had little or no background in marketing and she felt under-prepared to teach them. She wished that there was more communication about the students' profiles prior to the commencement of the course.

Vignette 4 - Siva

Siva was engaged by a training institution to teach programming to a group of trainees. The administration told him that he had to pass the entire class because they had promised all students that they would pass the course. Siva believed his authority as a teacher was challenged. How could he agree to pass everyone if he had not even met and taught his students? Furthermore, the administration mandated a particular software to be used to teach his class. Siva, on the other hand, preferred another software that he thought was more suitable. Lastly, the administration told him that to pass, all students required a minimum of 80% attendance. This requirement also troubled Siva because from his experience, it was unreasonable to ask working adults for so much commitment. Moreover, his course would be taught online and recorded, so students could watch lessons that they miss, rather than be physically present for all lectures. Because of these expectations, Siva reported being pressured and constrained and could not teach the course as well as he would have liked.

Both these vignettes suggest that better communication between CET educators and administrators can help both parties understand each other's constraints and challenges better and potentially derive better solutions and processes that are beneficial to both stakeholders. Open and reciprocal communication between administrators and educators can achieve a constructive alignment of values, allowing for each party to understand the needs, concerns, and challenges of the other, and help them come to the best arrangement.

Support for Students Before and After the Course

Educators communicated their observation that students may benefit from pre-course counselling and post-course guidance. They shared concerns of students enrolled in courses that were wrong fits and students struggling to find jobs even after course completion. Some educators spoke about the conflict of interest an institution has in marketing their courses. Vignette 5 describes this conflict from the perspective of a CET programme recruitment staff member. Other educators suggested how education institutes can help students find jobs. Vignette 6 describes how a CET learner experienced the benefits of a CET programme that provided opportunities for networking.

Vignette 5 - Sharifa

Sharifa works in a department in a polytechnic and her role is to recruit adults for CET programmes. One of her key performance indicators is the number of students she recruits. Hence, she is driven to promote the CET courses to bring in more students and revenue for the polytechnic. However, there were times where she counselled students and realised that her courses were not suitable for them and another course from another polytechnic would suit the student better. She reported feeling conflicted about whether she should tell the potential student about the other course, or try to fulfil her role of promoting courses to students. She noted an independent counsellor who could advise students based on their needs would be a better arrangement for fairly advising potential CET students.

Vignette 6 – Mr Lee

Mr Lee decided to take a computing course after being retrenched as a banker. As part of the course, the school provided networking opportunities to help their students find jobs. Hence, every month, as part of the course, they visit different IT companies in Singapore and attend Zoom meetings where people from the industry share about the latest trends. During one of the company visits, one of the managers was impressed by Mr Lee's finance knowledge and his many years of experience managing teams at the bank. The manager invited Mr Lee to apply to work as an IT manager in his company after he completes his course. Mr Lee was thankful that his education institute had arranged for various activities that allowed him to meet people who are in hiring positions that directly increase his chances of finding a job when he graduates.

Both vignettes show that sometimes the challenges faced by CET educators and learners are systemic in nature and a broader view should be taken to resolve issues like enrolment into the inappropriate courses or inability to find jobs after graduation. In other words, more can be done to assist students in the process of course selection and develop skills that are essential for finding jobs, such as networking and resume writing skills.



Coping with the New Online Education Provisions

Another issue raised by many of the CET educators are the challenges brought about by the shift to online education. Some have successfully made the transition, while others continue their struggle to do so. Educators appreciate any form of assistance that can be provided to them, whether it comes in the form of free courses or subsidies to attend trainings. Vignette 7 describes a CET educator's journey from being unfamiliar to online education to embracing online facilitation, a progression that many CET educators have undertaken in the past year because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Vignette 8 describes how a CET educator recognised that students also struggle with the transition to online education and how she designed an orientation to ease the transition for them.

Vignette 7 - Sarah

Sarah has had many years of teaching experience, but has mostly taught face-to-face. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, her institution mandated a switch to online teaching over Zoom. Being unfamiliar with online education, she was initially uncertain whether she could manage this switch. To help herself, she asked her colleagues for tips and attended free online trainings on how to conduct online training. Over time, she gained confidence in online teaching and learned to engage her students online. Her institution also informed her that it is unlikely they would return to fully face-to-face trainings because of considerable cost savings from not having to rent training venues. Many students have also feedbacked to her that they enjoyed online training as it was more convenient for them. She realises that online education may become the standard mode of CET and hopes that more subsidies can be provided for adult educators to upgrade their online teaching skills.

Vignette 8 - Rachel

Rachel realised that many of her students are unfamiliar with online education. She was able to ease their discomfort with online learning by conducting an orientation where she explains to students about online education. During the orientation, she lays out some ground rules such as students should turn on the video function if their situation allows for it so that she can get a sense of their understanding and attention and so students can get to know one another. She also introduces them to the online platforms and tools that she frequently uses so that students know what to expect. She found that having such an orientation reduces the anxiety and confusion for her adult learners who are new to online education.

Both vignettes describe how adult educators realised that a major shift has occurred in the way adult education is organised since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some are coping better than others with the change. But generally, more support can be offered to assist educators in this transition.

Skills Adult Educators Need Today

CET educators also realise the unique demands of adult education and the challenges of teaching adults. For example, many of their students have different levels of knowledge and abilities, some of them are not motivated to learn, and others may look down on lecturers and challenge their authority because they see themselves as superior in knowledge and experience. Vignette 9 describes how an educator had designed his course such that he can meet the needs of both beginner and advanced learners. Vignette 10 describes how an educator facilitates her lessons to ensure maximum benefit for her students, despite being out of the industry for some years.

Vignette 9 – Wei Song

Wei Song teaches investment. His courses are attended by a wide range of students; some are beginners; others are advanced investors; some he claimed were even more experienced than him. To cater to the advanced students, he ensures that he uploads materials for future lessons ahead of time so that more advanced learners can self-study at their own pace. He confided that because of student diversity, the demands on the trainer are much higher for adult education. Though he needs to put in more effort in planning and organising the course to cater to learners of different abilities, he feels rewarded when he empowers his learners to be independent.

Vignette 10 - Rita

Rita worked in events management for over 10 years before becoming a lecturer at a polytechnic. Over time, as her teaching skills increased and improved, she found she has increasingly lost touch with the industry. Recently, she was given a class of CET students. On the very first day, she told her students about her work history and what she knows and does not know. Her teaching style is such that she engages the expertise of the students in class as a resource. So even though she is not as experienced or knowledgeable as some of her students, all students enjoy Rita's lessons and benefited from her facilitation of the lessons, because they learn from one another and are guided to relevant resources to deepen their learning. The classroom atmosphere is warm and inclusive and everyone is open to learning from each other, as Rita guides them along.

These vignettes show that adult educators face diverse and unique challenges in teaching adults. Importantly, many of them have learned to cope with these challenges and have a rich source of practical knowledge. During the sessions, some of the educators shared openly and honestly about their issues and asked for solutions. It appears that such exchanges, made possible through the online workshops and webinars, might actually be beneficial for educators as they have a chance to learn from one another on how to cope with some of the common issues faced by adult educators today.

Conclusions

These vignettes provide a glimpse into the complex work of CET educators in Singapore and some of the challenges they face. CET educators and administrators have to constantly adapt to real world changes, government policies, and learn to work not only with students but also employers and administrators. The vignettes and their discussion lead to the following recommendations:

1. *An independent unit to oversee pre- and post-course student counselling*

The findings suggest that, on their own, the provision of courses for adults is insufficient in helping them attain their career goals. They may need course and career guidance and assistance to help them understand and select appropriate CET programs and find jobs. To avoid inappropriate enrolments in a course resulting in unmotivated or regretful students, a third-party institution could provide impartial counselling, matching students to suitable courses. This institution can also advise CET providers on organising their CET courses and programmes to facilitate job and career transitions.

2. *Opportunities for stakeholder collaborations prior to course commencement*

The findings also suggest that oftentimes CET educators, administrators and employers seem to work independently from each other and lack opportunities for collaboration. Institutions offering CET can create more opportunities for CET educators, administrators, and employers to meet and understand one another's needs. There is sometimes a lack of common understanding of each other's roles. Possibly, prior to companies engaging in the services of educational institutions for CET purposes, the three parties can collaborate through joint planning and sharing concerns to achieve effective outcomes that are mutually beneficial.

3. *An expanded professional association can be set up to meet the collective needs of adult educators*

More resources can be set aside to support adult educators in their roles. For example, a guild or association of adult educators could offer opportunities such as learning conferences, online workshops and sharing sessions, to meet the learning needs of adult educators more fully. The IAL might expand its role in working with the adult educator community. Because of the diversity of adult educators, some from private institutions, others from public, and many freelancers - many reported being isolated in their struggles, though many face similar struggles. An organisation that oversees the concerns and learning needs of these adult educators may considerably benefit the adult education fraternity, regardless of whom they work for. Such an organisation can provide free or low-cost trainings, which many adult educators reported benefiting greatly from. It can also provide opportunities for discussion sessions, which we also observed through the sessions that CET educators and administrators can benefit much from.

4. *Regulation of the processes and outcomes of CET to ensure quality provisions*

As the range of CET providers has rapidly increased, it is important that CET processes and outcomes are regulated. The findings suggest that some private education institutes do not have guidelines on best practices for matters such as assessment criteria, attendance marking, and teaching platforms. This may result in a disparity of the quality of education offered to students across educational institutions. There needs to be some guidelines provided to educational institutes to ensure that at the minimum, there is a reasonable standard of quality that all of them adhere to. Perhaps the expanded association in point 3 can also play such a regulatory role to guide administrators who need help. Such an association can even play a mediating role should there be issues between CET educators and administrators or their institutions.

