

# **Polytechnic Education: Key to Employability and Quality of Life**

## **1. What is Quality of Life?**

If we were to reflect on the many questions that we have asked during our lifetime, most of us would admit that somewhere, at some point, we have pondered over the question, “What is quality of life?”. Certainly, there would be individuals who will simply say quality of life means having enough money to spend to one's heart's content. Some would even define quality of life as the result of having the most beautiful physique. To many people, quality of life may simply mean “being cool” (whatever that is!). A simplistic answer would probably be:

- one spouse
- two kids
- three-room apartment
- four wheeler
- five-figure salary

However, on deeper reflection, most Singaporeans would be happy with:

- having a roof over one's head
- a family to share love, joys and sorrows
- a wholesome balance between work and recreation
- appreciating aesthetics and controlling over one's faculties.

While the understanding of what quality of life is varies over a spectrum of people, it varies over time too. The route to achieving a quality of life is often considered through education, one of the key factors which can lead to a job which pays well enough for us to live a comfortable, enriching and emotionally balanced life.

## **2. Education**

Education is the process through which a person acquires new skills and knowledge and learns new forms of behaviour which makes people more graceful, harmonious and civilised. It also inculcates moral values which help people be aware of their own identities and the individual attributes of others. The value of education lies in realising the importance of hard work, compassion and sincerity.

An important source of behavioural change is through a non-school environment - this is commonly referred to as informal education. Informal education is perceived to be insufficient as it tends to be adhoc and haphazard. There is a demand for a more systematic and structured form of learning.

From a society-point of view, informal education needs to be complemented by the formal education system as the latter is relatively rigorous and challenging and it provides a desired lifestyle for the prospective learners. In Singapore, the role of the

formal education system is well articulated in the Ministry of Education's website<sup>1</sup>. Stated as its desired outcome is the following:

**"The Singaporean - an Individual, a Citizen**

Education does two things: it develops the individual and educates the citizen.

Education is about nurturing the whole child. Indeed, this is the traditional Asian understanding of the term. Education means developing the child morally, intellectually, physically, socially and aesthetically."

*(From: Desired Outcomes of Education,  
[http://www.moe.gov.sg/corporate/desired\\_outcomes.htm](http://www.moe.gov.sg/corporate/desired_outcomes.htm))*

To achieve the above outcomes, a child in Singapore goes through six years of primary education and four years of secondary education, resulting in the taking of the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary) Level Examinations. After that, teenagers may opt for further education. If the chosen route is further education, the available choices would include enrolment in the following:

- a. Polytechnics
- b. Junior Colleges (or related institutions)
- c. Institutes of Technical Education
- d. education programmes run by private educational bodies
- e. overseas educational programme

So, what are the opportunities in store for a person choosing the polytechnic route?

### **3. Polytechnic Education and Employability**

The Ministry of Education website cited above gives the following brief description of polytechnic education under the category of post-secondary education:

"Polytechnics were set up with the mission to train middle-level professionals to support the technological and economic development of Singapore. Reflecting the wide range of abilities, aptitudes and interests of their students, the polytechnics seek to train students with relevant and specific skills for the workplace to give Singapore a competitive edge as we move into a knowledge-based economy. Today, polytechnic graduates are valued as practice-oriented and knowledgeable middle-level professionals, much sought after by industry."

The polytechnics are also a significant provider of continuing education and post employment professional development programmes and services."

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.moe.gov.sg/corporate/education\\_system.htm](http://www.moe.gov.sg/corporate/education_system.htm)

Hence the polytechnics are given the mission to equip our youths with skills to meet the challenges of the knowledge-based economy and to upgrade the employment skills of the workforce. This is to have a nation of people who can stay employable on a life-long basis and are adaptable to the changes in the workplace. Today, the emphasis on employability goes beyond staying as an employee but to entrepreneurship and self-employment for professional and personal fulfillment.

#### **4. Employability and Quality of Life**

Most people when asked “what is employability?” would explain the term employability as the ability to get a job and remain employable – the possession of technical skills and knowledge would mean that anyone with a Polytechnic education would be well prepared for employment. Thus, in the polytechnics, most courses are biased towards skills acquisition with plenty of hands-on practices and imparting of skills in locating and solving workplace related problems.

With changes in the economic and employment scenery, the polytechnics are also offering modules which enhance the communication and soft life-skills of its learners. The aim is to increase the employability of each and every learner. In pedagogy, changes have been made in favour of a learner-centered approach to learning. In addition, the emphasis placed on e-learning enables our students to be life-long learners upon graduation.

Thus both the management and staff of the polytechnics have embraced changes which aim to develop graduates with a holistic mindset to stay employed. This will empower them to determine their preferred “quality of life”.

#### **5. What are the Challenges and Concerns?**

As the academic staff union, we are committed to exploring the current and future challenges and the concerns of our members in educating students to seek life-long employability and live a good life. It is our intention that this symposium will serve as a platform where emerging challenges can be discussed. Some of the challenges we face and the concerns we have include the following:

##### **a. The Culture of Disrespect**

The above phrase is not our invention, it is a term widely used by British educationists to describe the negative behaviour of their youth. Today, as academic staff, we see that an increasing number of students perceive the following behaviours as only minor indiscretions:

- being late for classes
- being rude
- disrupting lessons
- having little regards for the feelings of others

How did this culture of disrespect come about? We suspect that this is the result of changing societal values and the emphasis that students are our customers. The implication is that a culture of mutual respect have to be reinforced. This emerging trend of disrespect inhibits the learning process. We wonder how employers would react if our graduates take such attitudes to the workplace.

#### **b. Apathetic Learners in An Age of Affluence**

Most Singaporeans who were brought up in the early fifties and sixties had a natural desire for learning, as living in an era of poverty, education was an opportunity, not a right. Education was then considered a way out of poverty. During those days, most students in tertiary Institutions were self-motivated. Today, the youth live in an era of affluence, where education is an event or a phase of life which they go through because it is simply available and affordable. Thus, it is not uncommon for students to:

- go to classes unprepared
- skip classes
- submit sloppy work
- do the minimum and expect to pass
- remain seemingly unfazed in spite of poor grades
- stay unengaged throughout a lesson

The impact of such behaviour is that the true value of the lecturers is wasted in doing unproductive activities. The challenge for us is how to infuse in our students an appetite for learning. In other words, bringing the horse to the water is not enough. We need to ensure that the horse becomes so thirsty that it will not only willingly drink the water but more importantly, makes concerted efforts to seek water.

#### **c. Making the Right Choice**

It is a paradox of life that although students often complain about a lack of choice, when choices are given, there is a substantial group who will claim that they had made the wrong choice! Thus it is not uncommon for students to stay less motivated as they claim that they have not been given their first choice in the allocation of courses. Similarly we have students who have difficulty in following a course as they have selected the wrong course of study. How do we motivate such students? Should we allow them to switch courses? If not, then the challenge for us is how to develop strategies to convince students that their chosen course can give them a best employability-fit.

#### **d. Stress and Depression**

Stress and depression amongst students are becoming more and more common. Even amongst staff members, it is becoming not- too-rare to see signs of stressful and depressive behaviour. For staff, there is an increased feeling of insecurity as more and more lecturers are now hired on short-term contracts of

one, two or three years subject to the possibility of further renewal of their contracts. Being stressed or depressed, or both, is undesirable as it prevents a lecturer from giving his best in adding value to the students.

## **6. The Contributions of The Ngee Ann Polytechnic Academic Staff Union (NPASU)**

The primary role of lecturers is to give our students the best learning experience for optimum employability and good life. This means that the lecturers should not only be competent in academic teaching but also impart correct societal values. Thus a good lecturer is one who is well versed in facilitating student-centered learning. In addition, he should be the person who actively and consciously imparts good moral and professional values.

What has our Union done to enhance polytechnic education in contributing towards our students' and graduates' quality of life? NPASU has played and will continue to play the role of promoting a work environment where its members stay motivated. To fulfill this role, our Union has put in place several schemes and activities which are unique to the Ngee Ann Polytechnic. These schemes and activities include the following:

### **a. Platforms for Discussion**

Being a body entity, the NPASU has the capacity to provide platforms for discussion amongst its members as well as with outside parties. Thus we took advantage of our 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in organising a symposium on 7th August 1990 on the theme: "**Changing Trends in Polytechnic Education: Implications and Challenges.**" On our 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we held a symposium on 25th August 2000 on the theme "**Polytechnic Education in the New Millennium.**" Today, we are celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on the theme "**Polytechnic Education – Key to Employability and Quality of Life.**" Such symposiums, we believe, create greater awareness for our lecturers in the arena of education and also allow us to harvest different views of the speakers, invitees and guests.

### **b. Successful Negotiation of Our 1<sup>st</sup> Collective Agreement**

The successful signing of our Inaugural Collective Agreement (CA) with the management of Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NP) on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2004 represents a milestone in the history of the labour management relationship (LMR) in the annals of the NPASU. The negotiation process leading to the signing of the CA (Website: [www.npasu.org.sg](http://www.npasu.org.sg)) has provided the Union and the management the opportunity to comprehensively review the terms and conditions of service in the Polytechnic. The process has brought about a better working environment for the employees and helped to further strengthen the already complementary relationship between the Union and the Polytechnic. With the CA, the staff members now have a clearer understanding of their rights and obligations. The CA also provides a proper channel for handling of staff grievances. This means that the Union has the responsibility of taking care of its members in industrial relations matters.

**c. Consultative Discussion – AMCC**

Unique among the polytechnics in Singapore, and after many years of mutual consultations, in Ngee Ann Polytechnic we have set up the ASU – Management Consultative Committee (AMCC) which is jointly chaired by a senior management staff (presently a Deputy Principal) and our President. The AMCC meets once every 2 months and it is during these meetings that issues involving academic staff are discussed, clarified and resolved on a win-win philosophy of tri-partism. We are glad to report that many thorny issues were resolved amicably by the AMCC, resulting in academic staff being put in a clearer position to perform at their best.

**d. Collaborative Work with Management**

Recognizing the fact that organising of joint events promotes cooperation and mutual understanding, the ASU and NP Management (as well as other bodies in NP) have collaborated in the organization of three National Day Observance Ceremonies. This annual joint observance of National Day by management, staff and students strengthens the bond and is a good opportunity for us to show our loyalty to the nation. There are still grounds for other forms of collaborative work and we will explore such opportunities further to reinforce our successful partnership with the management.

**7. Proposed Future Plans**

As we strive to excel in our present tasks, we are also mindful of having to make plans for the future. Planning for the future is an on-going exercise and choices have to be made. Amongst the various strategic areas of importance, we want to give priority to develop a scheme for retired academic staff to further contribute to the education of the nation's youth. In this respect, we are considering a scheme where retired NPASU members can still be a part of NPASU as "honorary members". Except for industrial relations issues, honorary members will be able to participate in the activities organised by the NPASU. Details of this scheme are still being worked out. In parallel with this scheme, we are also considering setting up a network whereby retired lecturers can pool their resources as a training co-operative to provide training services for the industry. It would be good, if this proposed co-operative be managed and led by our honorary members.

**8. Conclusion**

We as a union believe that the route to quality of life is a sound and relevant education that will provide all of our students with skills, values and motivation to stay employable. It is in this context that polytechnic education is important. As a partner in education, we believe that the NPASU will continue to play an effective role in bringing the message across to all. The message is "Polytechnic Education: Key to Employability and Quality of Life".