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## Singapore's economy does not sufficiently value those doing 'hands-on and heart work': DPM Wong



The Government will do its part to invest in people, and reduce the material gaps in wages and incomes, DPM Lawrence Wong said. PHOTO: ST FILE



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**SINGAPORE** - Singapore's economy places too much of a premium on cognitive abilities, and does not sufficiently value those engaging in "hands-on and heart work" such as technical, service and community care roles, said Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on Tuesday.

This trend is seen, worryingly, in a growing divergence between the starting pay for Institute of Technical Education (ITE), polytechnic and university graduates, he said.

The median starting salary for a university graduate is now almost twice that of an ITE graduate, with the earnings gap increasing over their lifetimes, said Mr Wong at the Singapore Economic Policy Forum held at Regent Singapore hotel.

The event was organised by the Economic Society of Singapore in partnership with the Singapore University of Social Sciences and in support of Forward Singapore - a year-long exercise for the Government to engage Singaporeans and update various policies to strengthen the social compact.

Mr Wong said: "We must do more to recognise the value of hands or heart work across the economy. Many of these jobs tend to be in the local services sector, where productivity is generally lower than the export-oriented industries.

"So there is a need for painstaking effort, industry by industry, to look at ways to redesign jobs and raise productivity, to upgrade skills, and establish better career progression for workers."

These efforts are already taking place in the pre-school sector, especially across government-supported pre-school centres, noted Mr Wong.



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This does not simply mean having better starting salaries for teachers but also a clearer skills and careers ladder for everyone in the sector, he said.

"Some may become specialist teachers in fields like early intervention for children with special needs; or those with the aptitude and capabilities might take on leadership positions – to mentor teachers, develop teaching practices, or even oversee not just one pre-school centre but a cluster of pre-school centres," added Mr Wong.

"This is something we must strive to do across all sectors of the economy."

Singapore is already tackling the wage gap between people engaged in "head work" and "hands and heart work" through various ways, he said.

For example, it has tightened its foreign worker quotas and has also over the last decade raised its local qualifying salary. A company's work permit and S Pass quota entitlement is based on the number of local employees earning the local qualifying salary. The Republic has also uplifted the wages of lower-wage workers through the Progressive Wage Model (PWM).

"This has resulted in real wage growth for our lower-wage workers over the past decade, and we are working to expand the PWM to more sectors and occupations," he said.

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Singapore is also investing in the quality of vocational instruction in its institutes of higher learning. It is levelling up its ITE skills-based curriculum to give students deeper industry-relevant skills, and increasing the number of work-study diplomas across sectors to deepen their industry exposure so they can have a head start in their careers, said Mr Wong.

He added that the Government will do its part to invest in people, and reduce the material gaps in wages and incomes between different types of work.

But businesses must do their part too, said Mr Wong.

Companies should recognise the value of different types of work, redesign their business processes and jobs, and pay their workers well, he said, adding that the Government will support firms through measures like the Progressive Wage Credit Scheme, which co-funds eligible wage increases given to lower-wage workers.

“All of us as Singaporeans must do our part, and be willing to pay more and bear the higher cost of goods and services delivered by our fellow workers in these different sectors and occupations,” he added.

He added that wages is just one part of the debate for many people because respect and dignity matter equally, if not more.

“We must move away from preconceptions that academic success should be prized above all others. Instead, we must respect those who labour with their hands and hearts, and confer upon them the same status as other paths,” he said.

“We must also give them opportunities to advance in their respective fields, and not pigeonhole them into specific tasks, or hold them back unfairly.”

This requires fundamental mindset shifts in society – by employers in hiring, training and promotion, and through mutual respect among Singaporeans regardless of their occupation or station in life, he said.

“Ultimately, our promise must be this: regardless of which path you take, as long as you work hard and continually upskill, you will be accorded recognition for your skills, given opportunities to advance, and be rewarded fairly for your efforts.”

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