

# Preparing The Transformation Of CET In Singapore

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## Interview with Dr Lee Kwok Cheong

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*Dr Lee Kwok Cheong, Chief Executive Officer of SIM Global Education, speaks to us about the future of work and learning in this issue. With over 20 years of experience in the IT sector, which includes heading NCS Pte Ltd as the Founding Group Chief Executive Officer, and a wealth of experience in learning and development, Dr Lee's perspectives give us fresh insights into the ongoing transformation of the continuing education and training industry, and the role of IT in shaping the future.*

*Today, Dr Lee continues to share his expertise through key positions in various organisations and committees, such as the Steering Committee of the Infocomm Media Masterplan under the Ministry of Communications and Information, ITE Holding Pte Ltd, Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore and Nera Telecommunications Ltd, to name a few.*

Dr Lee Kwok Cheong, as a veteran in Singapore's continuing education and training (CET) landscape, you have witnessed the transformation of this sector over the years. What are your thoughts on how the CET landscape has changed over time?

I see a major shift in Singapore's CET landscape, in two aspects. First, while the CET sector used to have many small-ish private providers, now the public and quasi-public bodies such as the universities, polytechnics, NTUC, and even IAL, are all offering CET in a big way.

Secondly, many Singaporeans are doing self-learning using resources available online, such as MOOC (Massive Online Open Course). This could mean the traditional CET vendors would be squeezed out of the Singapore

market.

Could you share your thoughts how CET will continue to transform?

If we look at technology and social media, they could transform learning in four ways. Firstly, they make learning social, as it should be, by facilitating much more peer-to-peer learning and sharing, and evolution into a community of practice.

Secondly, they allow mix-and-match, like buying individual songs from different sources rather than buying a whole album/CD. So more people can learn from the best teachers and the best modules regardless of whether they are from the same organisation.

Thirdly, they allow just-in-time learning. Fourthly, they allow massive learning on a personalised basis, through learning analytics which track individuals' pace and needs. Together, they can make learning hugely more effective and more fun.

When we look at industry trends, my concern is that universities tend to offer modules that would stack up to a degree. Mixing competency-based training and academic qualifications may be attractive to individuals in the short term, but it may not facilitate the necessary change of mindset from academic qualifications to industry-relevant skills.

How can we prepare for the CET future you have just described?

Singapore is at the beginning of a transformation to bring learning to the next level. All the tools and funding are there. The barrier is mindset change – of learners, providers, employers, parents.

I hope the government would help nurture private CET providers and work with employers to foster individuals' mindset of learning competencies rather than chasing paper qualifications.

Having a dynamic CET sector with both public and private players, and on-line as well as face-to-face deliveries would be the best dynamic and resilient long-term solution. There should also be more focus on supporting learning by doing rather than setting up new training centres for emerging skills. By definition, in our fast-changing economy, future skills cannot always be pre-defined years ahead and structured into training curriculum.

Moving on, what are your thoughts on Singapore's CET solutions and expertise breaking into the regional market? What would you say need to be in place so that Singapore's CET experts are ready to go international?

For Singapore's CET institutes and professionals to go to the region, they need to do their due research and market study, understand local needs and training gaps, and contextualise their teaching and materials. Since most of the economies in the region are at earlier stages of development, I believe the biggest reward may come from offering more foundational solutions – vocational and technical training, supervisory level soft skills, because the market size is huge for these.

Another niche area could be residential programmes for future leaders from the region to immerse in Singapore's advanced practices, like the "Mayors' Class" at the Nanyang Technological University.

To go international, we need to have scalable business models and compelling "products". In Singapore, we rely a lot on government push and incentives. Overseas, we face more bottom-up decision-making and lower ability to pay. Our CET professionals and institutes will need to adapt their business mindset and approaches to local market realities if they are to succeed.

[Top](#)