

Collaboration needed to address education crisis, say E.Asian leaders

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The widening global skills gap and talent shortage must be urgently addressed through collaboration between industry and educational institutions, and between the private and public sectors, said business, government and university leaders in a panel session on the final day of the 2010 World Economic Forum on East Asia. The session focused on the outlook for Asia's next generation of talent.

"There is a global crisis in education, not just in Asia," warned David Thai, Founder, Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of the Board of Viet Thai International Joint Stock Company, who is a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader. Said James T. Riady, Chief Executive Officer of Lippo Group in Indonesia: "Nation building is about developing our human resources. The people are the most important. But in human resources development, we are falling behind. We are doing a poor job of addressing the knowledge and skill gaps."

Everyone should have equal access to some level of education, and more people should have the opportunity to enter higher education, Riady argued. "But the government does not have the resources to support them. This is where the private sector must come in." He called on schools to shift from traditional by-rote learning to focus on teaching young people how to be critical thinkers. Some education systems put so much emphasis on technical skills that when economic or social conditions change, graduates cannot cope, Riady explained. Families should become more involved in the education of children, particularly in the inculcation of values and ethics, he advised.

To close the skills gaps will require countries to work together and ministries within governments to cooperate, said Annie Koh, Associate Professor of Finance and Dean of the Office of Executive and Professional Education at Singapore Management University. "If ministries work independently, it will not help businesses or the country. There has to be collaboration across agencies." Companies have to build links with schools, she added. "Industry has to take ownership as a partner in developing talent. We cannot just look at universities and say that they are at fault. Industry has to come in as partners in shaping the curricula."

For its part, the education sector should be in tune with the needs of business and industry, reckoned Dang Thanh Tam, Chairman of Saigon Invest Group (SGI).

"Universities need to study what business needs. They must study the future of Vietnam and how the economy is growing so students [graduate with skills] that are close to what is demanded." Vocational schools, meanwhile, should be given the importance they deserve because of the key role they play, said Jeffrey Joerres, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Manpower, the global workforce solutions group. In addition, schools should recognize the impact of media and technology on young people and consider how this should change the way teachers teach.

"There are so many new forces shaping their minds; they are learning in a different way," Joerres observed. To promote change in education and training, schools, teachers, businesses and students should try new things, "break a few rules and get the government to be a bit nervous," he suggested.

Governments certainly have to be sensitive to social conditions and how to implement necessary

reforms to ensure that the supply of skills and talent meets demand. South Korea has encountered unexpected challenges that have resulted from its success in developing its human capital, Kwak Seung-Jun, Chairman of the Presidential Council for Future and Vision in the Republic of Korea, explained. Youth unemployment in his country is high because many young people are too well educated for the jobs that are available and are not willing to take the positions that are open. "We need educational reforms."

Despite the warnings of a crisis in education, panellists concluded that there is reason for optimism in East Asia. "The talent is there; the ambitions are there," said David Thai. "You have talented and motivated people who excel. But what do we do to unlock that potential?"

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