

**OPENING ADDRESS BY MR TAN KOK YAM, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, SKILLSFUTURE SINGAPORE & CHAIRMAN, INSTITUTE FOR ADULT LEARNING COUNCIL, AT THE ADULT LEARNING XCHANGE 2025, 29 MAY 2025 (THURSDAY), 9.00AM, SANDS EXPO AND CONVENTION CENTRE**

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Distinguished Guests,

1. It is a privilege to join you once again at IAL's signature event.
2. At the last ALX, Minister Chan Chun Sing provided the opening speech. This year, the Ministry of Education had a complete refresh of its suite of political leaders. The Cabinet was sworn in only last Friday and given the short turnaround time, we are unfortunately not able to have a political office holder join us at today's event.
3. While we may have a new team of ministers, one thing remains clearly unchanged: the national emphasis on upskilling our workers, and on advancing the SkillsFuture movement. Only last week, Prime Minister Mr Lawrence Wong officiated an event that marked the 10th year of the SkillsFuture movement. There is clear commitment of all parties — not just Govt, but the union, employers, business federations and training sector — to level up the movement, and serve our workers even better.
4. What does “levelling up” the SkillsFuture movement mean? In fact, PM's speech pointed out, Adult Education is hardly a new concept in Singapore. We should have had plenty of time to perfect it by now. The Adult Education Board was formed in the early years of self-government, to teach English and Math. The Board then expanded to train for vocational skills. Those were challenging times but in a way simpler times, as far as training is concerned. Fast forward to today, our economy is broader and much more variegated; we are competing for jobs across a broad swathe of sectors from legal to manufacturing. The need for talent is deeper, we are competing not just for jobs but for good jobs. The pace of change is higher. The march of technology is relentless, and in the short to medium term, geo-political drama is playing out at a breathless pace. So this is a far more sophisticated and dynamic economy that the training sector — us — needs to serve. If we do not level up, we will only spiral down.

5. Take AI, the theme of this year's ALX. Two weeks ago, the economist published an article titled "Welcome to the AI Trough of Disillusionment". It seemed only yesterday that the World Economic Forum and others were predicting a sea change to jobs, industries and the labour market. It also seemed only yesterday that we were all bowled over by the poetry and travel itineraries of ChatGPT. Well, the article highlights three challenges that companies trip over in getting the technology to work for them. First, data is disorganised. Second, talent is lacking. Third, risk management is not thought through. All three challenges are due to deficiencies in capability and skill, not deficiency of technology. They are about the hard slog of moving from the initial wow to the more consequential how. So I think that it is quite prescient for IAL to title this conference from wow to how.

6. There is another shift that the conversation on AI needs to take. Recall in the immediate months following the release of ChatGPT, the talk was all about whether AI replaces the human worker, was it as intelligent, was it as creative. Thankfully, the discussion switched to something more meaningful and productive, about how AI can augment the human worker, through human-machine collaboration. The co words came out — Cobots, Copilot. For this conference, let's take it one step further, and discuss how AI can improve the human mind, how to unleash human brilliance through AI, the second part of our conference theme. How do we use AI to upskill our workers, and raise their competencies and confidence. This is the wow to how AI journey for the training sector. I look forward to the many insights and ideas, ranging from practical to wild, that will come of out of our discussions.

7. As we respond to new technology and new needs, experimentation and a certain degree of risk taking will be part and parcel of the training business. We should be bold and forward-thinking in challenging conventions and reimagining the approaches to learning and course delivery. SSG has introduced a regulatory sandbox which offers time-limited waivers of course-related policies. The idea is to test first, before we make it mainstream. We have recently approved our first two sandbox players. Lithan Academy is trialling an adaptive learning model which adjusts the time commitment of the course based on the learner's objectives and existing competencies. Capelle Consulting is

piloting a co-learning model which involves supervisors in the learning process, to help with the transfer of the learning effectiveness to the workplace. Perhaps after this conference, we will have more ideas from you to populate our sandbox.

8. SSG is committed to listen and respond. We understand that policies and regulations can get in the way of innovation, and we are prepared to adjust. On your part, we invite you to be bold, pilot new ideas, and lead in andragogical innovation to transform the learning experience.

9. Your involvement is crucial. As adult educators and professionals in the training sector, you are the key determinant of the quality of the learning experience, and the relevance of that learning to career and life. I would like to suggest four “Cs” for us to collectively focus on, as we level up the training sector.

10. First “C”: continually upskill, both in content and in andragogy. The skills and knowledge imparted via the Advanced Certificate in Learning & Performance, offered by IAL today surely cannot be enough in 10 years. I said IAL is prescient, but nobody can be that prescient. IAL knows that. It has invested significant effort to build up a suite of continual professional development modules but take up can be strengthened. Going forward, IAL and SSG will set up a robust framework to ensure that all adult educators receive regular practice hours and continual development throughout their career as an educator. We are in the midst of consultations and are working toward announcing and formalising the framework in the coming months.

11. Second “C”: Connect with industry. The institutes of higher learning have well established linkages with companies and industries. CET academies within the IHLs should make the best use of that. For the rest, SSG also has a growing network of Queen Bee companies and trade associations and professional bodies. If you need to, treat us like your industry engagement office.

12. But connection goes beyond that. The linkages need to be more organic and embedded, not just at the system or institution level, but even at the individual educator level, at the course level. Increasingly, we should bring the industry voice into the classroom, so that learners hear direct from practitioners, and practitioners are given a

stake in training their potential future colleagues or collaborators. SSG will make changes to make it easier for such practitioners to be engaged in adult education, after we equip them with some andragogical know how.

13. Third “C”: Collaborate across the community. IAL’s Adult Education Network (AEN) has grown remarkably, from 7,000 members in 2019, to over 40,000 members today. Interest groups range from coaching and critical core skills to entrepreneurship. Many members have found valuable opportunities through AEN — from mentoring newer practitioners to engaging in collaborative projects and developing new learning solutions. The network has supported 180 mentees through the mentorship programme and Special Interest Groups are led by seasoned chairpersons who actively foster learning and professional exchange in their respective domains. I would encourage you to tap into this rich community to grow your practice and broaden your impact.

14. Fourth C: Contextualise the training to career. At the minimum, let’s give learners a sense of how the skills taught relate to job roles across industries; we now have the tools available in the jobs skills portal. Those looking for career transitions may need more support. They may require a level of career coaching, or some link to a company that can provide an attachment, internship or even more permanent employment. To do some of these, our training partners may not have all the capacity or capability today. We will have the support of Workforce Singapore if we require reinforcements.

15. Ultimately, this is about the biggest “C” word: confidence. We must continue to build confidence in the lifelong learning system, so that individuals who wish to invest in themselves can have confidence in the learning we deliver. Companies need to have confidence that learning creates value for their business. It will be an ongoing journey, an upward spiral as learners raise their expectations and challenge us to do even better. It is this upward spiral, this levelling up of SkillsFuture, that will give us the confidence as a nation to grasp the opportunities that come by, not only to gape and wow at the tech, or to flounder around wondering how to execute, but to seize opportunities, try new things, build new things, stay sharp and competitive.

16. With that, thank you. I look forward to learning alongside you at ALX2025. I wish you all a fruitful and inspiring conference.