

PMETs will get more help: PM Lee

Govt to expand available training programmes for them into a Professional Skills Programme

By LYNETTE KHOO

[SINGAPORE] PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians), who are often regarded as the "sandwiched" group that receives the least help from the government, are not forgotten in this economic downturn.

More aid is on the way to help them stay in their jobs or find new ones if they are retrenched. The government will pull together available training programmes and expand them into a government-funded Professional Skills Programme (PSP).

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong unveiled this in the Singapore Tripartism Forum dialogue yesterday as he warned Singaporeans of more downside risks ahead for the economy.

"Our GDP growth is forecast to be between -2 and -5 per cent. It could be worse if the global economy worsens, even lower than -5 per cent is possible," PM Lee told an audience of 550 employers, unionists and government representatives.

Singapore needs to be mentally prepared for several years of slow growth after that, he said. "Over the next four-five years, if we can get 2-3 per cent growth, I think that's not bad; 3-4 per cent growth, I would say we are lucky."

Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam noted that the debate on the economy has already shifted from a U-shape or a V-shape recovery to a U-shape or L-shape recovery that is characterised by a very prolonged bottom.

In this downturn, more PMETs are expected to be affected as the majority of Singaporeans now come under this category, added Acting Minister for Manpower Gan Kim Yong.

The Ministry of Manpower and the Workforce Development Agency will hence roll out the PSP to target the PMETs. It will be included under SPUR or Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience, and receive enhanced funding.

The PSP will cover skills conversion to help PMETs gain new skills to switch professions in growth areas and skills upgrading to make them more employable within the same industry.



PM Lee: It will be unwise to force companies to send foreign workers back

For instance, financial industry professionals can specialise in risk management or product control through courses at the National University of Singapore and Singapore Management University. New or existing operations or customer service managers can take the Workforce Skills Qualifications Diploma in Tourism.

The PSP will also provide tertiary upgrading for PMETs under the enhanced SPUR programme, leadership and management skills training as well as career workshops.

Based on figures from unionised companies alone, retrenchments almost doubled from 800 in the third quarter last year to 1,500 in the fourth quarter, said Lim Swee Say, secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress.

For the first six weeks of this year, retrenchments hit 2,700. The first quarter is expected to see some 3,700 retrenchments. "We are concerned about this trend," said the labour chief. Re-employment of

workers above the retirement age of 62 has also dropped in the first two months of this year by some 20 per cent.

But Stephen Lee, president of the Singapore National Employers Federation, said that there is no evidence that employers are targeting older workers when making job cuts.

Mr Gan said that the government was keeping to its plan for re-employment legislation by 2012 to enable more people to continue working beyond 62, up to 65 in the first instance and, later, up to 67.

And as with past recessions, there has also been a drop in the number of foreign workers. But PM Lee noted that it would be unwise to chase them out and force companies to send them back. This may not translate into more jobs for Singaporeans but, instead, hurt Singapore's reputation with multinational corporations (MNCs).

Without foreign workers, some companies may have to close down or decide to shift their entire business out of Singapore. "The right thing to do is make Singaporean workers more attractive to businesses, through Spur and Jobs Credit," PM Lee said.

Singapore would also do well to identify niche areas where there are still opportunities.

To this end, the Economic Development Board is also working hard to bring in more investments from overseas, PM Lee said.

Despite the downturn, Rolls-Royce is moving its marine business headquarters from London to Singapore and Abbott Laboratories will open its US\$300 million nutritionals manufacturing facility in a few days' time.

"MNCs believe Asia will resume growth, and see Singapore as an important part of their Asian strategy," PM Lee said.