

Longer-term flight path still intact for aerospace sector: JTC

Infrastructure works for the Aerospace Park; workers being reskilled for recovery

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EXPANSION plans for Seletar Aerospace Park, comprising infrastructure development works, are on track despite the severe headwinds that the sector is facing, JTC Corporation has said.

Responding to queries from *The Business Times*, JTC said it is because it takes a long-term view and is committed to investing for the future.

Meanwhile, the novel coronavirus pandemic has decimated air travel demand and upended aviation, tourism and related industries, including the aerospace sector itself.

The statutory board had earlier said it would be embarking on the next phase of land preparation works in Seletar Aerospace Park this year, as it signed a record S\$500 million in deals at the Singapore Airshow in February.

Among the agreements are plans for new facilities and business expansion.

The government has already pledged its strong support for the aerospace sector. Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing said Singapore is not going to be just de-

fensive in preserving capabilities in the sector to deal with the pandemic-driven turbulence, but will take advantage of the lull to upgrade workers' skills so they are positioned for recovery.

On that note, workers in the aerospace sector are now eligible for the Enhanced Training Support Package (ETSP), with more than 13,000 highly-subsidised training places available.

The scheme for the sector was unveiled by Mr Chan and Minister of State for Manpower and for Education Gan Siow Huang on Tuesday, when they visited Singapore Aero Engine Services. The company is the world's largest Rolls-Royce Trent aero engine maintenance, repair and overhaul facility.

Addressing reporters via a video-conferencing platform, Mr Chan reiterated the importance of the aerospace sector to Singapore. It accounted for 1 per cent of Singapore's gross domestic product with total output at S\$13.1 billion last year, and employed more than 22,200 workers; of that number, 74 per cent were professionals, managers, executives and technicians.

He noted that the aerospace sector has been hit by a fall in demand, but its medium- to long-term prospects are still good.

As capabilities in the aerospace industry take time to develop, the government can neither take a short-term perspective to investments, nor fol-



Minister Chan Chun Sing (second from left) and Minister of State for Manpower Gan Siow Huang (extreme right) visited Singapore Aero Engine Services on Tuesday.

PHOTO: MINISTRY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

low a feast-or-famine strategy that ramps up training when demand is high and cuts back on it when demand flags.

"We are not just investing in the skills for the current generation of engines, but also investing in new skills, including the digital skills required to manage the new generation of engines that will propel the aviation sector in the next lap," he added.

He said another way the government helps to preserve core engineering capabilities in a downturn is to deploy skilled workers to adjacent industries, so that these workers can be easily redeployed to their original sector when the tide turns.

For instance, when the offshore and marine sector was going through a rough patch a few years ago, some

local engineers were deployed to work on government projects, including the Mass Rapid Transit.

Executive vice-president of the Economic Development Board (EDB), Tan Kong Hwee, told BT that the organisation is working with the National Trades Union Congress and other government agencies to help retrenched or furloughed workers in seeking alternative employment opportunities and training support.

He said: "Where possible, we seek to leverage the existing capabilities of affected employees to place them in manufacturing sectors such as electronics and biomedical sciences."

Meanwhile, SkillsFuture Singapore will provide support under the ETSP to the aerospace sector between now and Dec 31, 2020.

It is estimated that this will cost the government S\$14 million as part of the Stabilisation and Support Package announced earlier.

Employers who send their staff for selected sector-specific training will get absentee payroll support at 90 per cent of workers' hourly basic salary, capped at S\$10 per hour, as well as funding support at up to 90 per cent of the course fees.

The National University of Singapore, NTUC LearningHub, SIA Engineering Company, ST Engineering Aerospace and Temasek Polytechnic have been appointed to offer about 100 courses for the sector.

The ETSP is also available to the following sectors hit by the pandemic – tourism, air transport, retail, food services, land transport, as well as arts and culture.