SINGAPORE'S
EVOLVING MERITOCRACY

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> "
Let me start with how we are giving our young the best possible start in life. So that anyone who works hard will have a chance to succeed, regardless of starting point or family background. Because this is what meritocracy in Singapore is about.
"

– Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the National Day Rally in 2019.

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INTRODUCTION

Meritocracy has often been credited as being fundamental to Singapore's economic success. Meritocracy has also become an important tenet in Singapore's society, with most people largely accepting the basic idea that everyone should have a chance at life, and that society should remain open with opportunities for all (Singaporeans), and that the best person at their jobs should be rightfully rewarded.

In the history of Singapore, meritocracy was important as a principle that distinguished itself from countries in the region. As a multiracial society with the need to develop the economy, meritocracy was an important concept to provide a framework for people to come together and participate, without favouring any particular ethnicity. Former Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan noted that the construction of Singapore society as meritocratic differed significantly from the way other societies in Southeast Asia had built themselves up along lines of ethnic hierarchy.[1] In addition, meritocracy was often tied to the idea of equality of ethnicities in Singapore. During the period of Merger from 1963-65, meritocracy and the equality of ethnicities would be a major point of contestation that led to Singapore's Separation (and Independence) from the Malaysia.[2]

In the decades since, meritocracy has been an important principle undergirding Singapore society and economy. There is wide acceptance of meritocratic principles in society, that competent people should be heads of organisations, and that high rewards should be accompanied by high accountability.

[1] Kausikan, Bilahari. 2016. "Can Singapore Cope?" Lecture 5 of Dealing with an Ambiguous World. IPS-Nathan Lectures. Retrieved 16 September 2019: https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/mr-bilahari-kausikan-s-speech.pdf?sfvrsn=16cb680a_0

[2] HistorySG. 2014. Singapore separates from Malaysia and becomes Independent. Retrieved 16 September 2019: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/dc1efe7a-8159-40b2-9244-cdb078755013

However, there had been several tensions. In addition to this, Singapore's meritocracy is criticised for becoming elitist, in that the rewards of meritocratic competition seemed to be increasingly concentrated in a small pool of individuals.

Various academics of Singapore such as Kenneth Paul Tan, Donald Low, and Eugene Tan had described the challenges to meritocracy in Singapore due to elitism and inequality. Kenneth Paul Tan described how meritocracy was under strain in Singapore due to the tension between the egalitarian and the elitist aspects. Globalisation was increasing the rewards to a small group of people, while the majority of people might find themselves unable to benefit from. He noted some of the episodes in the earlier part of the 2000s (involving the controversial comments from a daughter of a Member of Parliament, and a charity scandal), which shook public confidence in the establishment. These episodes seemed to demonstrate that the establishment was out of touch with the rest of the population, with seemingly little empathy for their predicaments. In addition, the NKF scandal also demonstrated how a member of the establishment was self-serving and even corrupt.[3] Since those circumstances, the train breakdowns in 2011 and 2015 led to further questions about meritocracy and the establishment.

Donald Low distinguishd between "varieties of meritocracy" – of type and effort, between "Wall Street" and "Silicon Valley" meritocracy, and "trickle-down" and "trickle-up" meritocracy. For Mr Low, meritocracy in Singapore seemed to be more about rewarding type rather than effort – more about finding or revealing the right type of attributes rather than rewarding people for effort. In Mr Low's description, when compared, the "Wall Street" meritocracy tends towards various dangerous tendencies, such as self-entitlement, and moral hazard – where the mistakes they make end up endangering the rest of society. In the third pair of comparisons, "trickle-down" meritocracy, efficiency considerations are more important than equity considerations. He contrasts this "trickle-down" view with a "trickle-up" view, one where government actively redistributes resources towards human capital development, ensuring that everyone gets a fairer starting position.[4]

At the micro-level, meritocracy in the education sector is also under strain as the stresses of a seemingly zero-sum competition for a small number of positions consume parents and students alike. The expenditure of Singapore's parents in private tuition was estimated at $1 billion in 2014 and estimated to have increased to $1.4 billion in 2019.[5,6]

Meritocracy is also in tension with inequality. In a globalizing world, individuals with the abilities will be rewarded tremendously – the "superstar" effect.[7] While rewards for these individuals will rise, the rewards for other individuals will be considerably less, increasing the economic inequities. Unless the state steps in with redistribution, society becomes polarised, divided between the small group who will possess much, and the majority who will possess little.

This would go against the important aspect of fairness in meritocracy – that individuals should have had a fair chance at the various opportunities on offer, with everyone more or less at the same starting

[3] Tan, Kenneth Paul. 2008. "Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City: ideological Shifts in Singapore" in International Political Science Review 29(1). Pp. 7-27.

[4] Low, Donald. 2013. "Good Meritocracy, Bad Meritocracy" in IPS Commons. url retrieved 16 September 2019: https://www.ipscommons.sg/good-meritocracy-bad-meritocracy/

[5] Tan, Therese. 9 November 2014. "$1 billion spent on tuition in one year" in The Straits Times. Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/1-billion-spent-tuition-one-year

[6] Seah, Kah Cheng Kelvin. 12 September 2019. "Tuition has ballooned to a S$1.4b industry in Singapore. Should we be concerned?" in Today. Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/tuition-has-ballooned-s14b-industry-singapore-should-we-be-concerned

[7] Rosen, Sherwin. 1981. "The Economics of Superstars" in The American Economic Review. 71(5) pp. 845-858

Individuals should have had a fair chance at the various opportunities on offer

point, with similar resources. While individuals should work hard and attain the goals that they choose, it was the responsibility of the state to distribute resources to individuals at the start in life and mitigate the inequalities at the outset (trickle-up meritocracy).[8]

Maintaining an open meritocratic system is thus an immense challenge. A meritocratic society has to encourage excellence through rewards, and at the same time, continuously ensuring that the meritocracy remains open, fighting against exclusive elitism – the tendencies for winners to justify their rewards and close off meritocracy to others in the name of efficiency.

This case study looks at the implementation of meritocracy in education and politics throughout Singapore's history, and how they

have changed over the years. The case demonstrates the willingness of the Singapore state to refresh the concept of meritocracy by broadening and including more paths for Singaporeans of various abilities to develop their capabilities over time. This case also demonstrates a point of flexibility – that no guiding idea or ideology should be fixed in perpetuity, and that states can act in incremental ways over time to transform a system. The rest of this case will look at meritocracy as applied in two important spheres of Singapore society: in politics and in education.

The education system is an important site in the implementation of meritocracy as a principle. For the Singapore state, the education system has to implement multiple aspects of meritocracy. It has to serve both as a way to provide people with the capacities to

participate in the economy to have a fair chance at success in life (however defined), and at the same time, to serve as a funnel for the government to identify top talents to staff the bureaucracy, and in politics.

In politics, Mr Lee was convinced that there were particular qualities, such as "leadership" and "talent" that were innate and could not be cultivated.[9] The education system served as a way to identify potential candidates from young and invest in them from early on. As they enter into political life, subject them to further testing to see if they are indeed candidates worthy of higher political office. In this sense, changes in the education system would also be reflective of how meritocracy in Singapore is changing.

As this case study demonstrates, Singapore's implementation of meritocracy has continued to evolve in the direction towards broadening the definition of meritocracy, and towards broader inclusiveness in giving people better chances in life.

[8] Low, Donald. 2013. "Good Meritocracy, Bad Meritocracy" in IPS Commons. url retrieved 16 September 2019: https://www.ipscommons.sg/good-meritocracy-bad-meritocracy/
[9] Barr, Michael. 2006. "Beyond Technocracy: The Culture of Elite Governance in Lee Hsien Loong's Singapore" in Asian Studies Review 30(I), pp. 1-17

BROADENING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

The education system in the early years of independence had to grapple with several problems, the most serious of which was the high drop-out rates, which had other implications for national defence and the unemployment rate. In this context, a group of policy-makers proposed streaming as a way for students to learn at different paces.[10] This policy was proposed in 1979, and the concept would remain in place for the next few decades. Over time, the accompanying labelling and stigmatization of students at the slower streams had become an issue. The high stakes of streaming also created a stressful point in the lives of students of parents.[11]

In the context of meritocracy, early labelling and stigmatisation can sometimes over-determine life trajectories. An early belief in the limits of one's abilities can continue through life without fulfilling someone's true potential. The limitations of lateral movement also constrain social mobility. In this sense, an education system that was meant to cater to different learning speeds can end up having the unintended effect of limiting the potential, resulting in wastage at the society-level.[12]

Changes in the 2000s onwards to the education system at the interface of the primary and secondary education levels could be seen to be correctives to the situation. Streams in the primary-school level had been gradually abolished, replace by subject-based banding (SBB), and subsequently introduced to the secondary schools. These decisions eventually culminated in the 2016 announcement that the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE)[13] itself would eventually change, with the replacement of the streaming system in secondary education with SBB in 2024.[14]

The change in the PSLE scoring system was also significant in its own right – students would now be ranked according to absolute standards rather than relative standards, and that they would be given "Achievement Levels" more similar to the scoring system at 'O' Levels.[15] Together with the changes announced about streaming, this could reduce the previous labels and stigma attached to lower-performing students. In the context of Singapore's meritocracy, this was also a shift towards an even greater emphasis on developing the capacities of students, rather than in selection.

[10] Goh, Keng Swee and The Education Study Team. 1979. Report on the Ministry of Education 1978. Retrieved 16 September 2019: http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/956--1979-02-10.pdf

[11] Heng, Swee Keat. 13 March, 2013. Exams and Streaming: Recalibrating our education system in Today. Retrieved 16 September 2019: https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/exams-and-streaming-recalibrating-our-education-system

[12] Davie, Sandra. 5 March 2019. Streaming into Normal and Express in secondary schools to stop in 2024; to be replaced by full subject-based banding. The Straits Times. Retrieved 16 September: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/streaming-into-normal-and-express-in-secondary-schools-to-stop-in-2024-to-be

[13] The Primary School Leaving Examination is an examination that all primary school students have to take at the end of their primary school education. Their performance at this examination will determine the choices of secondary school that they can be enrolled in to continue their education.

[14] Ministry of Education Singapore. 2019. Changes to the PSLE Scoring and Secondary One Posting from 2021. Retrieved 16 September 2019: https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/psle/PSLE%20Scoring/psle-scoring.html

[15] Ibid

The secondary school system had also undergone several changes, in the direction of inclusivity and differentiation. The Singapore Sports School and the School of the Arts were formed to engage students with different talents, in 2004 and 2008 respectively.[16,17] In addition to those schools, there were also other specialised schools with different curricula. The NUS High School of Math and Science (established in 2005), affiliated to the National University of Singapore, offers a specialised curriculum in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education.[18] The

School of Science and Technology (established in 2010) specialises in applied learning and is affiliated with the Nanyang Technological University and Ngee Ann Polytechnic.[19]

There was also an expansion of the secondary school to include students who did not do well for PSLE. Northlight (2007), Crest (2013) and Spectra (2014) Schools joined the Assumption Pathway School in providing a "practice-oriented" curriculum for students, with pathways to vocational training at the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).[20]

> **The Polytechnic system, offering education in professional and technical areas was also expanded.**
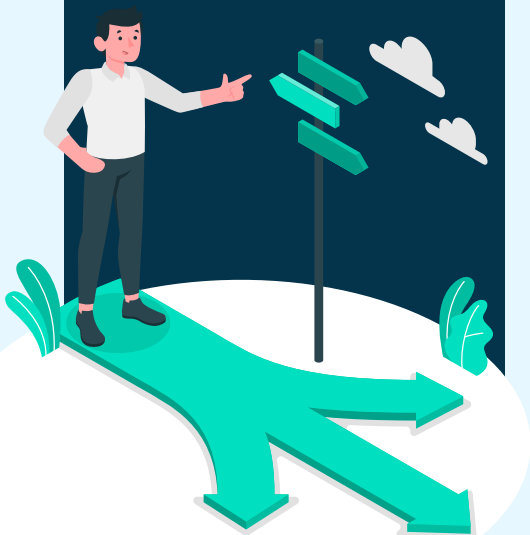
BROADENING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In addition to the changes in the primary and secondary school system, there were also changes in the post-secondary education landscape that meant a broadening of Singapore's meritocracy.

There had been different statutory boards that governed industrial training and adult education, with an emphasis on skills training for various industries. The Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB) was formed in 1979 from the combination of the Industrial Training Board and the Adult Education Board.[21] The VITB later underwent another set of changes and became the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).[22] ITE's

curriculum focused on providing vocational and technical training for students, so that they could be employable.

The Polytechnic system, offering education in professional and technical areas was also expanded. At Independence, Singapore only had a single polytechnic – Singapore Polytechnic, established in 1954. Ngee Ann Polytechnic was formed in 1963 as Ngee Ann College.[23]

[16] Singapore Sports School. 2019. Overview. Retrieved 16 September 2019: https://www.sportsschool.edu.sg/our-school/overview

[17] HistorySG. 2015. School of the Arts is opened. Retrieved 16 September 2019: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/a9ed544a-cdfc-4764-889b-18b65b29b15f

[18] HistorySG. 2014. NUS High School of Mathematics and Science Opens. Retrieved 16 September 2019: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/69b1cd43-82e4-4cef-8402-193584eaf39e

[19] HistorySG. 2015. School of Science and Technology, Singapore, is Opened. Retrieved 16 Septemner 2019: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/ec4cc0ce-c5f8-455f-84dd-afac27ba8953

[20] Ministry of Education, Singapore. 2018. "Secondary School Education: Shaping the Next Phase of Your Child's Learning Journey." Retrieved 16 September 2019: https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/education/secondary/files/secondary-school-education-booklet.pdf

The polytechnic system later expanded with the establishment of Temasek Polytechnic and Nanyang Polytechnic in 1992 and 1994 respectively.[24] Republic Polytechnic was established in 2002, using a "problem-based learning" approach for all the diploma programmes. While polytechnic education provides the skills for entry into the employment market, polytechnic students are also eligible for university education.

There had been changes in the university landscape, with local recognised universities given the status of "Autonomous University." At Independence, there was the University of Singapore and Nanyang University that merged into the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1980. Nanyang Technological Institute was formed in 1991, becoming the Nanyang Technological University when combined with the National Institute of Education. The Singapore Management University was formed in 2000, becoming the third autonomous university, and modelled after the Wharton School (of the University of Pennsylvania).

There was another round of expansion in the higher-education landscape. The Singapore Institute of Technology was established in 2009. The Singapore University of Technology and Design was formed in 2012, with curricula development support from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Zhejiang University. Singapore University of Social Sciences, formerly SIM University, was awarded the Autonomous University status in 2017.

- ✔ **More skills at higher levels of education;**
- ✔ **A higher-skilled workforce**
- ✔ **Ensuring greater opportunities for a larger share of the population**
- ✔ **Keeping meritocracy open in Singapore**

[21] Loo, Janice. unknown. "Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB)" in Singapore Infopedia. Retrieved 1 September 2019: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2018-10-09_155142.html

[22] Loo, Janice. unknown. "Technical and vocational education." In Singapore Infopedia. Retrieved 15 September 2019: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2019-06-14_155946.html

[23] HistorySG. unknown. Ngee Ann College Opens. Retrieved 15 September 2019: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/6d91f0f0-2ce4-4105-a4d2-0f7c382776fb

[24] Ibid

LIFELONG LEARNING

Changes in the education system were complemented by changes in the skills training system as well. This would be an important aspect of meritocracy in society, allowing individuals who might not have been academically-inclined to equip themselves with more skills later on in life. In this way, the extension of opportunities to learn in working life reduces the tendencies for individuals to be "locked-in" by their education attainments.

> "
> **We will build on these foundations to create a new environment for lifelong learning. It is critical to our future. It will develop the skills and mastery needed to take our economy to the next level. More fundamentally, it aims to empower each Singaporean to chart their own journey in life, and gain fulfilment at work and even in their senior years.**
> "
>
> *– Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, then-Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Finance, and Chairman of the SkillsFuture Council in 2015.[25]*

SkillsFuture could be seen as a significant development in the skills training and adult learning landscape in Singapore, with a more concerted push by the government. The four main features of the SkillsFuture movement include:

1 Helping individuals make well-informed choices in education, training and careers;

2 Developing an integrated high-quality system of education and training that responds to constantly evolving needs;

3 Promote employer recognition and career development base on skills and mastery'

4 Foster a culture that supports and celebrates lifelong learning."[26]

[25] Shanmugaratnam, Tharman. 2015. "Building Our Future, Strengthening Social Security" in 2015 Budget Speech. Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2015/pc#s1

[26] SkillsFuture. unknown. "About SkillsFuture). Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://www.skillsfuture.sg/AboutSkillsFuture

Other than the $500 SkillsFuture Credit for adult Singaporeans for training courses, the SkillsFuture movement include a variety of programmes for employees at different stages of their careers.[27] The movement also encourages employers to keep identifying programmes they could send their employees for. SkillsFuture ostensibly creates a path of continuously learning, preventing attainments from earlier in life locking in an individual's outcomes. In this open-ended meritocracy, people are free to move across different sectors rather than being consigned to a particular area.

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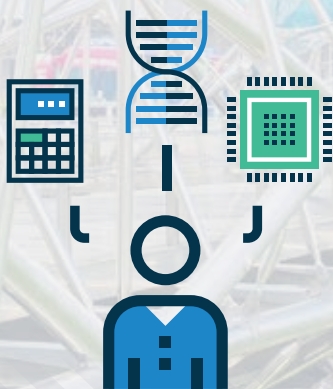
The creation of various paths of progression thus represents attempts to be inclusive – ensuring that the overwhelming majority of Singaporeans are able to participate in the economic system, no matter the performance at the primary school level. For those not academically inclined, the system of specialised schools focused on skills is an alternative to the rest of the academic system. At the higher end, those who can engage with advanced material can do so, going straight to the Advanced Levels (through the Integrated Programme) and so on. At the same time, the different paths are also porous – students who might not have done well at the primary level can still move across the different paths, such as with the ITE student who was able to enter medical school.[28]

The changes can also be seen to be reducing the prospects of an exclusive elitism that locks people out of education and economic opportunities. By letting the system remaining porous, Singapore society maintains an open and inclusive system that identifies and develops talent, and also ensuring that everyone has the capabilities to participate in the economy.

Another significant shift in Singapore's meritocratic shift had been in the pre-school sector. The Early Childhood Development Agency was formed in 2012 to develop and regulate the early childhood education sector.[29] The National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC) was also formed to develop professionals in 2017.[30] Since then, pre-school education had been made more affordable through greater subsidies for more families. This further equalises the meritocratic playing field by ensuring that most children would have some minimal education exposure before entering formally into the primary education system.

These changes in the education and skills landscape signify a broadening of meritocracy and reduce the emphasis on testing and selection. In Mr Low's typologies, Singapore's education sector may have been initially focused on "type" but now creates opportunities for "effort", geared towards a "trickle-up" system where there would be greater distribution of resources for more levels of ability.

[27] SkillsFuture. unknown. Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://www.skillsfuture.sg/

[28] How, Mandy. 2018. "First ITE graduate who just enrolled in NUS medical school was rejected last year" in Mothership. Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://mothership.sg/2019/08/medical-school-bursary-ite-graduate/

[29] Early Childhood Development Agency. (2019). "About Us." In Early Childhood Development Agency. Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://www.ecda.gov.sg/pages/aboutus.aspx

[30] Lee, Hsien Loong. 2017. National Day Rally 2017. Retrieved 16 September 2019: https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/national-day-rally-2017
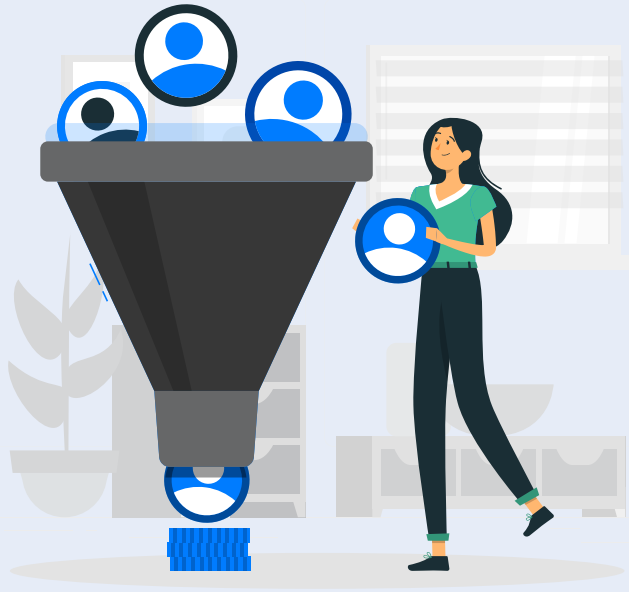
POLITICS

Meritocracy in Singapore has had to develop on the two tracks – to both develop people to be suited to jobs, and to reveal the best and brightest for national purposes.

In the political sphere, the focus was on finding the best person. In his memoirs, Mr Lee Kuan Yew discussed how he initially fielded individuals with doctorates, with mixed results.[31] He also looked at how other organisations were able to identify individuals who could function in times of great stress. He noted the example of how astronauts in the Apollo 13 lunar mission had to cope with the stress of being confined in the spacecraft while solving problems as they kept emerging throughout the entire mission.[32] The ability of NASA to identify astronauts prompted him to look at other organisations that had stringent assessments. Mr Lee would eventually land on a system of psychological assessments adapted from companies, with Shell often cited for its HAIR system.[33] The system was also subsequently used as part of assessments for scholarship recipients (later in this case), and for the recruitment of political candidates.[34]

[31] Lee, Kuan Yew. 2000. "From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000". New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid. "HAIR" refers to "Helicopter" perspective-taking – the ability to look at different levels of analysis and impacts. "A" refers to analysis, "I" refers to imagination, and "R" refers to the sense of reality.

[34] Ibid.

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

The Public Service Commission has been the government body in charge of disbursing scholarships. The scholarship system has since become an important avenue for the public service to find and recruit candidates with abilities, by sponsoring them for education at top institutes of higher learning both in Singapore and abroad. Of the various agencies that provide the scholarships, the top three scholarships have been recognised as the President's Scholarship, the Singapore Armed Forces Scholarship, and the Singapore Police Force Scholarship. The title of being a scholarship recipient accords a recipient an accelerated career path in the various uniformed groups and in the public service.[35] The significance of being a scholarship recipient also derives from the fact that Cabinet ministers, and senior public servants (such as permanent secretaries and heads of government agencies), have typically been scholarship recipients.

The Public Service Commission thus serves as an important gateway in the system of meritocracy in Singapore. The Public Service Commission has had to defend itself in being selective about the kinds of students that are awarded the scholarship. In the 2010s, the PSC did seem to have diversified the pool of students who did obtain the scholarship. The scholarship system had tended to attract students from junior colleges, and it was only in the 2000s that the first polytechnic students were receiving PSC scholarships. Towards the end of the 2010s, the first President's, SAF, and SPF scholarship recipients

came from a more diverse set of educational institutions, such as from the Singapore Sports School and SOTA.

In open letters to the public, the PSC Chair has had to communicate to the public that the PSC does not ensure "diversity for diversity's sake."[36] In the same letter, the PSC Chair also revealed trends in the distribution of scholarship recipients. The proportion of scholarship recipients from Raffles and Hwa Chong comprised around 60%, though in some years, they hit 80%.[37] The PSC Chair also revealed that the chief purpose of the

scholarship application remains that of revealing appropriate candidates, even as the diversity of backgrounds of scholarship recipients have increased.[38]

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60%, though in some years, they hit **80%.**[37]

[35] Lee, Hsien Loong. 2000. Speech by DPM Lee Hsien Loong at the SAF Overseas Scholarship 30th Anniversary Dinner on 15 April 2000 at 7.30pm at the Istana Banquet Room. Retrieved 15 September 2019: http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=2000041507.htm

[36] Teo, Eddie. 2013. "The PSC Chairman's Open Letter 2013." Retrieved 15 September 2019: https://www.psc.gov.sg/resources/psd-chairman's-open-letters/psc-chairman's-open-letters-2013

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

Other than the scholarship system, the conception of meritocracy was applied to political office holders. Lee Kuan Yew and the Cabinet went through possible candidates in the bureaucracy, and identified potential personnel in the professions. He felt a keen sense of necessity in the 1970s, as Hon Sui Sen announced his desire to retire from politics.[39]

Through the 1970s, there was a process of political renewal – standing down grassroots leaders that had brought the PAP through the difficult periods and making way for new politicians who might not have had the same grueling experience in the grassroots.[40]

There was also a concerted effort to find replacements for Cabinet. There had been attempts to recruit people with PhDs into political office, with the highest profile being Dr Lim Chee Onn,[41] once even touted as a possible replacement to Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Dr Lim entered politics in 1977, became a member of the Cabinet from 1979-1983, and entered into a successful career with a government-linked company.[42]

[39] Lee, 2000.
[40] Lee, 2000.
[41] Michael Barr
[42] Lee, 2000; Dr Lim left Cabinet in 1983 and remained an MP till 1992.

Salaries for political office holders were a major plank in the selection process. To create an environment where more people might want to step into politics, Mr Goh Chok Tong, as Prime Minister of Singapore, enacted another set of reforms, linking the pay of political office holders to the pay of top professionals in the private sector.[43] This was done in 1994, to reduce the differential between public sector pay and the private sector. In 2011, with the PAP experiencing the first loss of a Group Representative Constituency, PM Lee Hsien Loong convened a committee to review the salary of Ministers.[44,45] The pay of political office holders were revised downwards.

Review

The education system had been focusing on catering to different capabilities and ensuring that they can participate in society. There has also been a broadening in the definition of 'merit' beyond grades alone. The SkillsFuture framework encourages continuous learning throughout life, no longer constraining individuals to their attainments earlier on in life.

The political system on the other hand, is about creating conditions to reveal potential officers of talent. The system of ministerial salaries is meant to reduce the extent of sacrifice that individuals have to make should they leave lucrative private sector careers for political office.

As this case study demonstrates, the application of meritocracy in Singapore has been flexible. The education system had opened up significantly from the independence, creating multiple avenues for people to participate in the market meritocracy. The public bureaucracy and the political system had remained a selective one, revealing competent people for government; many of whom going on to enter politics. The salaries framework serves as a non-disincentive, attempting to make compensation a non-issue for those willing to step forward and serve.

The political system remains open towards high performers. As long as the meritocratic framework remains, it will be acceptable for political parties to attract high performers from the private sector. Concomitantly, the issue of high ministerial salaries pegged to the private sector rate will remain as an issue that will flare up from time to time.

For Singapore, the core concepts of meritocracy have remained the same: selecting the best person for the role; that the education system should fulfill potential of the people.

[43] Government of Singapore. 1994. "Competitive Salaries for Competent & Honest Government: Benchmarks for Ministers & Senior Public Officers – White Paper."

[44] Prime Minister's Office. 2011. "Committee to review salaries of the President, Prime Minister and Political Appointment Holders." Retrieved 17 September 2019: https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/committee-review-salaries-president-prime-minister-and-political-appointment-holders

[45] Committee to Review Salaries of the President, Prime Minister and Political Appointment Holders. (2012). White Paper: Salaries for a Capable and Committed Government. Cmd. 1 of 2012. Retrieved 17 September 2019: https://www.psd.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/white-paper---salaries-for-a-capable-and-committed-govt.pdf

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Singapore will continue to experience strains in the meritocratic system, as the process results in winners and losers. Over time, the advantages of the winners will accumulate, resulting in widening inequalities in societies. Left unchecked, a society will be riven with divides resulting in tensions. The Singapore Government consistently made adjustments to meritocratic principles, broadening the domains of meritocratic competition, and becoming more inclusive of the participants. As liberal flows of talent and finance continue, the winners in the globalising system could continue to attain a larger share of the rewards. The task of maintaining a system that remains open and encourages participation will become more challenging.

In the near-term, the assumptions of benchmarking pay of political office holders with the market will likely remain, unless socio-economic conditions change drastically. There will probably be further tweaks in the scoring formula, and the magnitude of the pay will continue to attract criticism. This relationship might change as politics becomes more contentious and if technocratic skills are less emphasised as a result. Such a move away from technocracy might also make the pegging of ministerial salaries to the market less tenable. In the next decade however, this looks unlikely to happen given the firm belief in technocracy in Singapore.

The education system, an important component in Singapore's meritocratic system, will also have to undergo further changes as society goes through technological and economic system changes. As techno-economic system changes,

the kinds of skills and training that will be rewarded will also change. Given that there are limits to skills and knowledge plasticity, society might have to again rethink the parameters of meritocracy and how it is practiced.

Meritocracy can be seen as a crucial principle for governance in Singapore since 1959. Although it is an important principle in Singapore governance and society, it has been flexibly implemented and modified throughout the decades, to ensure inclusiveness in Singapore society, and to attract a wide range of talent for politics. Given how there have been system-wide changes in the past, meritocracy will likely continue to be flexibly implemented in the future.

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This case study was completed in October 2019, and reflected the policies then. Policies might have changed since then that time.

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