



Year 2010 In Brief¹

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The following is a summary of some of the key policy issues that hit the headlines in 2010. It is a selection made by the authors to provide a quick reference to IPS researchers.

Economic Recovery and Reorientation

The Singapore economy grew by 14.5% in 2010, signalling a strong economic recovery from the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 when gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 slumped by 0.8%.² The global recession gave occasion for a reconsideration of Singapore's long-term economic strategy by a government-appointed committee chaired by Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam. This culminated in the Economic Strategies Committee (ESC) Report released in February. It provided "strategies for Singapore to maximise our opportunities in a new world environment".³ It recommended that this would be achieved by "boost[ing] skills in every job...deepen[ing] capabilities among Singapore companies to seize opportunities in Asia...[and by] mak[ing]... Singapore a distinctive global city".⁴ It was the combined effort of individuals from the government, labour movement, private and academic sectors.⁵

The key thrusts of the ESC were accepted by the government at the annual national budget debate in March.⁶ Broadly speaking, the government committed to raise productivity levels, nurture globally competitive local companies and ensure that all Singaporeans would benefit from economic growth.

Specifically, the target for productivity is to achieve an improvement of two to three per cent per year over the next decade, and this would be implemented at the cost of \$5.5 billion over the next five years to begin with. This goal was underpinned by a three-tiered strategy: first, the government would allow market forces to "restructure our overall economy towards higher-value activities and exit from less efficient ones";⁷ second, the country's leadership would incentivise upgrading efforts by industries and enterprises with tax benefits and grants; third, the government would develop the potential of workers by improving the Continuing Education and Training (CET) infrastructure. The government also said that the increase in productivity should gradually help to reduce the dependence of the economy on foreign workers.⁸ Meanwhile, the price mechanism approach of "raising foreign worker levies rather than [the]...imposing [of] numerical limits" would be used to calibrate the supply of foreign workers.⁹

Next, the government said it would provide further support to local companies to compete on the global stage in the sectors of “clean energy, waste and water management, healthcare, education and transport management”.¹⁰ This would be achieved by first, leveraging on partnerships between local companies and multinationals, as well as business associations that could act as growth champions; second, encouraging private sector research and development efforts, and; third, improving the access of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to public funds designed to promote entrepreneurship.¹¹

The final focus of the budget debate was on enabling “every Singaporean [to] share...in the country’s growth”.¹² At the level of individual income, this would be achieved through government transfers for older and low-wage workers, increase in Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) Scheme payouts, and Workfare Training Scheme (WTS) absentee payroll and course fee subsidies,¹³ investments in the CET system, and a more progressive property tax regime. The government also promised greater tax relief to support the family unit and financial top-ups for education.¹⁴

The proposed budget measures raised concerns amongst Members of Parliament (MPs), opposition politicians and business leaders that SMEs may be hit by the “double whammy”¹⁵ of speedy implementation of higher foreign worker levies at the start of July and the phasing out of the Jobs Credit Scheme (introduced in 2009), at the end of June 2010.¹⁶ Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Sylvia Lim of the Worker’s Party (WP) asked if economic growth had benefitted Singaporeans in light of the increasing wage gap.¹⁷ MP Low Thia Khiang also of WP argued that the greater presence of foreigners to sustain high economic growth had depressed the wages of low-wage workers. Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam’s response was that this view was “wrong and misleading”¹⁸ as the influx of foreign workers had brought about greater economic growth which in turn increased the wages of low-income workers.¹⁹ Minister Tharman said that the push to increase productivity was akin to participating in “a marathon with no finish line”,²⁰ in addressing comments from Nominated Member of Parliament Mr Viswa Sadasivan that the new impetus in 2010 to improve productivity levels reflected the lack of success of previous efforts.²¹

Help for Low-wage Workers

As part of the discussion to improve the wages of low-income workers and after Hong Kong approved the introduction of a minimum wage policy, academics and politicians also explored this idea for Singapore thanks to a debate contrived by The Straits Times. On 2 September, it published an article by Associate Professor Hui Weng Tat of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy who argued that wages of low-wage workers were depressed by the influx of foreign labour. The low wage also caused some local workers to withdraw from the workforce. A minimum wage policy, he said, would attract more local workers back to the workforce, boost their morale, obviate the need for remedial measures like WIS, and encourage employers to be more efficient in their use of workers to justify the higher wages.²²

There was an article written in parallel to that of Prof Hui’s by Professor Lim Chin of the National University of Singapore Business School who argued that the government system of income subsidy through Workfare had a less distorting effect on business and would not

cause businesses to retrench workers who could least afford to lose their jobs. The free market allowed employers to accommodate workers of different marginal productivity.²³ These views were debated by public intellectuals who were concerned that policymakers should look into the issue to ensure inclusive growth and social cohesion.²⁴

In turn, government leaders stated their views. Minister of State for Trade, Industry and Manpower, Lee Yi Shyan, Minister in Prime Minister's Office and former labour chief, Lim Boon Heng and Minister in Prime Minister's Office and current labour chief Lim Swee Say highlighted that what was needed to improve workers' livelihood was to help them achieve a "minimum [level of] skills"²⁵ rather than minimum wage, to afford the higher wages they were seeking. Notably, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong said that Workfare was indeed "better than the minimum wage"²⁶ as the latter would place a burden on the employer and discourage the hiring of workers.²⁷

Within the opposition camp, the Reform Party (RP) and Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) supported a minimum wage policy. The RP said that minimum wage would be more effective in forcing businesses to find ways to increase the productivity of their workers.²⁸ The SDP proposed the minimum wage measure because the Workfare policy as currently constituted only benefitted older low-wage workers with its minimum criteria that beneficiaries had to be 35 years old and older, rather than low-wage workers across the board.²⁹

The minimum wage debate has led to discussion of other ideas that might help low-wage workers such as unemployment credit and inflation-indexed retirement grants.³⁰

Housing Matters

2010 was also a year of rising housing prices, which raised concerns amongst Singaporeans about the affordability of public housing. HDB advance estimates have revealed that resale flat prices increased throughout the year. Price growth, however, slowed in the last quarter with a 2.4 per cent increase, as compared with 4 per cent in the third quarter.³¹ The median cash-over-valuation amount paid for resale HDB flats had decreased by 23 per cent to \$23,000 in the fourth quarter, from \$30,000 in the third quarter. However, property firm ERA Asia-Pacific associate director Eugene Lim said that public property prices were still on the rise with the increasing resale flat valuation amounts.³²

Early in the year, National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan sought to manage the expectations of Singaporeans with the assurance that public housing was affordable if potential home owners, especially first-time buyers were not overly choosy. The public sentiment on this issue was mixed as home sellers and property developers conversely benefitted from escalating home prices.³³ In August 2010, the government moved to temper housing prices and increase the ease with which first-time buyers could purchase their own homes. These measures included reducing the waiting period for built-to-order flats to be ready, increasing the minimum occupation period for flats received without government subsidy to five years from three, disallowing concurrent ownership of public and private residential properties within the minimum occupation period of the public flat, and the extension of the \$30,000 Central Provident Fund Housing Grant to persons with household

income ranging between \$8,000 and \$10,000 for the purchase of Design, Build and Sell Scheme flats.³⁴ The government promised to increase the supply of flats available to first-time home buyers.³⁵

Ms Hazel Poa of the RP raised several issues with the way that the Ministry of National Development had measured housing affordability. In April, she argued in an Internet posting that the figures released by Minister Mah in a Straits Times interview would paint a less positive picture of the median household income vis-a-vis the resale price index with a change in the base year. Minister Mah did say later that “it is possible that prices of resale flats have risen faster than incomes when indexed against different years” in response to a similar question raised by PAP MP Lim Biow Chuan in Parliament.³⁶

In November, Minister Mah wrote an article in the Today newspaper commemorating HDB’s conferment of the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honour Award, which recognises achievements in human settlement development. Minister Mah said that the HDB had provided affordable housing for Singaporeans over the years as revealed by the housing price-to-income ratio (HPI) and debt-service-ratio (DSR).³⁷ Ms Poa disagreed with this suggestion. By her calculations, “a median income household [would take] more than double the time to pay for the [HDB] flat”³⁸ in 2009 in comparison with 1990 for the HPI. The DSR, according to Ms Poa, factored in only those who could already afford a flat. She said that the RP would increase subsidies for housing by cutting other forms of government expenditure (such as on defence budget, ministerial salaries), in addition to better managing the supply of flats in several ways (for instance, with the pegging of supply of flats to marriage and immigration indicators, and setting of a price band for resale apartments to median income).³⁹ The Ministry of National Development stood by its approach of leaving housing prices to the free market, whilst keeping a calibrated and watchful eye on prices and ensuring that there was no property bubble.⁴⁰ It also released more plots of land for private and public housing.⁴¹

In December, the question of whether the government had adequately factored in population growth in managing housing supply was also posed to Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, Lim Hwee Hua at a Kampong Chai Chee Ward grassroots event.⁴² In response, Minister Lim said that it was “extremely difficult”⁴³ to anticipate housing supply due to “shifting patterns and behaviours toward family formation”.⁴⁴

The Release of Town Council Management Reports

In 2009, the government launched the Town Council Management Report (TCMR) for the official purpose of “build[ing] up the nexus between town councils and residents”.⁴⁵ The TCMR provides an overview of town council management in four key aspects of “estate cleanliness, estate maintenance, lift performance and management of areas in service and conservancy charges”⁴⁶ and was jointly conceived by private and public sector experts.⁴⁷ The first and second TCMRs were released in June and December 2010 respectively. Generally, PAP fared better than opposition town councils in the first TCMR⁴⁸ and this gap widened in the second report. Although opposition town councils showed improvement in their ratings, they were outpaced by the progress that PAP town councils had made.⁴⁹

The results drew comments that the TCMR was a political tool to present the opposition in a negative light. Notably, a debate between Hougang MP Low Thia Kiang and Senior Minister of State (SMS) Grace Fu ensued on the availability of funds for upgrading and how this would in turn affect the ease of estate maintenance. Mr Low claimed that opposition town councils did not have the same access to funds that their PAP contemporaries had for upgrading which would reduce the cost of maintenance. SMS Grace Fu's response to this was that the link between upgrading and estate maintenance was not direct – upgrading did not always bring about less maintenance.⁵⁰ *The Straits Times* newspaper reported on Potong Pasir MP Chiam See Tong's view that the TCMR "was a political move to discredit the opposition ahead of the coming general election".⁵¹ Chiam alleged that it was impossible for HDB assessors "to be fair and transparent when they are in a biased position".⁵²

The government suggested that information on the management of sinking funds could be included in future TCMRs in December. As the decision to do so had not been made, town councils were encouraged to publish the relevant information on sinking funds on their websites.⁵³ This addressed earlier public criticism that the report had side-stepped the issue of financial accountability for those sinking funds.⁵⁴ Residents had expressed the need for greater transparency when it was revealed that town councils had made losses of \$16 million in investments in 2008 as a result of the global financial crisis.⁵⁵

The Benefits of Citizenship

In 2010, the government introduced greater differentiation of the benefits citizens and permanent residents (PRs) received by virtue of their residency status, to recognise the value of citizens' membership, commitment and responsibilities. On top of measures announced in the education system that would provide citizens with greater priority for entry in Primary One and reduced government subsidies for PR and non-citizens in 2009, it was announced that the hospital subsidy for PRs would be scaled back by five percentage points in both January 2011 and July 2011.⁵⁶ On housing, Singapore PR and Citizen (SPR-SC) couples would pay an additional \$10,000 for a new flat from HDB, or receive \$10,000 less for housing grants handed out for resale/DBSS flats or executive condominium units. The SPR-SC couple would receive \$10,000 if the Singapore PR spouse took up citizenship at a later date.⁵⁷

On national service, the government announced that Singapore citizens would receive the National Service Recognition Award (NSRA) in August. This would "provide sustained recognition for Singapore citizens who serve national service".⁵⁸ The NSRA hands out between \$9,000 and \$10,500 at the three key stages of national service (completion of full-time NS, mid-point of operationally ready (ORNS) training cycle and completion of ORNS training cycle).⁵⁹

The government also responded directly to concerns on immigration. It said it would not be possible to close the door to foreign talent. PM Lee Hsien Loong said in his National Day Rally speech that Singapore could however "get by with less, perhaps 80,000 workers"⁶⁰ scaling back on the original figure of 100,000 mentioned earlier in the year.⁶¹ PM Lee added that the government would invest heavily to improve the carrying capacity of the transportation system. This would ease congestion problems that the public had attributed

to the influx of foreigners. In the next decade, \$60 billion would go into developing the rail network system, for the inclusion of the Downtown, Thomson and Eastern Region lines. More short-term alleviation measures which include the modification of the railway system to increase the frequency of train services will be implemented. PM Lee also assured that public housing would be kept affordable. The public had, over the year, attributed rising housing prices also to the influx of foreigners and more specifically permanent residents in HDB sector. PM Lee also said that citizens did not need to be anxious about the availability of places in good school and universities; the education system would be ramped-up to ensure all would gain a good education.⁶²

Reduced Number of Permanent Residents

In September, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Wong Kan Seng said that 59,500 out of 115,900 processed applications for permanent residency were successful in 2009, mostly to family and dependents of Singapore citizens. He assured citizens that fewer people would be accorded the PR status in 2010.⁶³ In the same month, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong emphasised that the government took the question of allegiance and managing the inflow of PRs and then citizens very seriously.⁶⁴ In providing clarification for his remarks that the Singapore government would not renew the permanent residency of some 500,000 PRs should they turn down any offer of citizenship, SM Goh said that of these 500,000, “maybe 50,000 can be selected to be Singapore citizen, the rest can be PRs contributing to the economy”.⁶⁵

There were further efforts to facilitate the naturalisation and integration of new residents. From March, new citizens were required to undergo a ‘Singapore Citizenship Journey’, which would be “a more structured naturalisation process”,⁶⁶ consisting of a citizenship test, a tour and interaction with grassroots leaders amongst other measures.⁶⁷ The government also introduced new quotas in the public housing estates to ensure that there is an even distribution of PRs across the country by placing quotas on the number of PRs that could own HDB flats - non-Malaysian PRs can constitute a maximum of 5 and 8 per cent of the total population at the level of the neighbourhood and block respectively.⁶⁸ This SPR quota is to be factored in on top of the long-standing ethnic housing quota.

Inter-Religious and Racial Ties

The police arrested three Chinese youths for posting racially offensive comments on Facebook in the first quarter of the year, after national serviceman Mr Prhabakaran made a police report.⁶⁹ At about the same time, the Internal Security Department (ISD) conducted investigations on Lighthouse Evangelism senior pastor Rony Tan for offensive remarks on Buddhism and Taoism made on the pulpit. The public compared the way the government handled both episodes and raised questions about whether the authorities should have dealt with senior pastor Rony Tan more severely, as he was acting in his capacity as a religious leader and is a mature adult. In response, DPM and former Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng emphasised that an ISD inquiry was “not less serious than getting investigated by the police”.⁷⁰ The police did not charge the youths as their comments were viewed as an act of immaturity, rather than malice. The youth that started the Facebook group was sent to a

Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports' Guidance Programme for counselling.⁷¹

In June 2010, video clips containing offensive remarks on Chinese superstitions and Taoism by New Creation Church pastor Mark Ng were found in cyberspace. The New Creation Church and pastor Ng issued an apology on the church's website in an attempt to rectify the situation. However, as this gesture was deemed as inadequate response to the hurt caused in the view of Taoist Federation chairman Tan Thiam Lye, pastor Mark Ng subsequently released a statement to The Straits Times newspaper to "humbly appeal to those [he]...offended to forgive [him]...for this serious discretion".⁷² This case was also investigated by the ISD.⁷³

Jemaah Islamiah member, terror suspect and fugitive Mas Selamat was repatriated to Singapore in September 2010,⁷⁴ after his capture by the Malaysian authorities in April 2009.⁷⁵ In November 2010, it was revealed that three of Mas Selamat's family had played various parts in harbouring him after he escaped from detention at the Internal Security Department's cells in February 2008. They also made it possible for him to find passage to Malaysia. They were sentenced and jailed for between three to 18 months in closed-door court hearings. Political and Islamic religious leaders urged the public to view the incident as an isolated incident that was not reflective of the attitudes and sentiments of the larger Muslim community.⁷⁶ This episode caused Singaporeans to think about the issue of conflicting loyalties between family ties and the sense of responsibility to the state and society.⁷⁷

In December, PM Lee Hsien Loong emphasised the importance of religious harmony at a dinner held in conjunction with the Taoist Federation's 20th Anniversary celebrations. PM Lee said that "[r]eligious leaders have to lead by example [and their actions have]...a strong bearing on religious relations in Singapore".⁷⁸ PM Lee added that individuals had "to acknowledge and be sensitive to the differences between the different faiths because the teachings are not entirely the same".⁷⁹

Mother Tongue

In April, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen's comment that his ministry was in the process of determining if it was "educationally sound for mother tongue language performance to count for so much at the primary 6 level"⁸⁰ elicited a strong public reaction on the possible reduction in weightage for Mother Tongue Languages for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).⁸¹ Ground-up activism took the form of two petitions which garnered 2,500 and 1,000 signatures in that order, and more than 100 letters to the Straits Times forum page within three weeks.

The Straits Times reported that it was the younger and bilingual Singaporeans who were making their views known on the issue.⁸² The daily newspaper Lianhe Zaobao received many letters of protest against the prospect of reducing the weightage of Mother Tongue in the national examination. There was the concern that pragmatic Singaporeans would channel less effort into mastering Chinese if that were the case. This was seen as a contradiction with the Government's interest in ensuring that Singaporeans were ready to

operate well in the Mandarin-speaking and thriving market of China. There was also the belief that policy makers were acceding to the demands of an English-speaking segment of the population.⁸³

The reactions from the ground resulted in a statement by Dr Ng at a media conference that he regretted “creating that wrong impression”.⁸⁴ Dr Ng, who was accompanied by PM Lee Hsien Loong emphasised that the “government share[d] the same goals as many of those who have spoken up - to maintain a strong emphasis on mother tongue languages, to keep our bilingualism alive and ultimately to create the best environment to give our students and our children the best head start in life”.⁸⁵

Cabinet Reshuffle

In November, the government announced a Cabinet reshuffle. Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Mr Wong Kan Seng gave up his post as the Minister for Home Affairs to head the new National Population and Talent Division announced in the Prime Minister’s National Day Rally Speech. Senior Minister, Professor S Jayakumar gave up his post as Co-ordinating Minister for National Security to DPM Wong. Mayor of the South West Community Development Council Ms Amy Khor was promoted to Minister of State at the Environment and Water Resources Ministry from the position of Senior Parliamentary Secretary of the same ministry whilst retaining her other roles, Mr Masagos Zulkifli was promoted from the position of Senior Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of State for both the Home Affairs and Education Ministries, and Mr Sam Tan from the role of Parliamentary Secretary to Senior Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman was promoted to the position of Senior Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of National Development.⁸⁶

Media and Content Regulation

In September, the Censorship Review Committee submitted its mid-term review of recommendations. This committee, aimed to take heed of the shifts in society and the media landscape in its recommendations on the regulatory framework governing the artistic and communications scene.⁸⁷ The report findings drew a range of comments; some Singaporeans opposed the proposal of screening Restricted 21 (R21) films in the heartlands;⁸⁸ some arts practitioners which formed the anti-censorship group ArtsEngage were disappointed that the recommendation of a regulatory system in place of the current censorship regime was not accepted. ArtsEngage further said that the process of censorship could be more transparent and were in favour of a system that would allow for informed choice among adult audiences.⁸⁹

The response of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA), released in the same month, was that MICA would “move with, rather than move ahead of society” in its role as a content regulator.⁹⁰ It added that there would be increased choices in content allowed, but within the bounds of what it was deemed socially acceptable. The ministry would rely on parents to “exercise more effective control”⁹¹ over their children in their viewing choices.⁹²

Key recommendations that were accepted included a PG13 rating for movies, the screening of R21 films on paid television, a one-year term license for arts groups, and acceptance of

the arts appeal committee as the final authority in the censorship decision making process. Most of these recommendations would be implemented by the end of 2011.⁹³ Some arts practitioners viewed the one-year term license arrangement with scepticism as it did not provide greater clarity on the content that would infringe political 'out-of-bound' markers. Although term-licensing was implemented in 2003 following the recommendations of the previous Censorship Review Committee, arts groups continued to submit their scripts for vetting.⁹⁴

Rejected recommendations included the airing of R21 films in heartland cinemas, the scrapping of the ban on 100-websites, as well as the screening of dialect content on television and in the cinema.⁹⁵

Electoral Issues

In April, several legislative amendments on the local electoral system were passed; chiefly, the maximum number of Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMP) was raised from six to nine; the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme became a permanent feature that would not require Parliamentary approval; a cooling-off day was instituted on the eve of polling day.⁹⁶ This paved the way for a system that provides, in the words of Law Minister K Shanmugam, a "government with a clear, strong majority...that can provide good governance"⁹⁷ as well as "more diverse views, including opposition views...in Parliament".⁹⁸

There were debates in Parliament on the increase in the presence of opposition politicians through the proposed changes. Some PAP politicians said that the increase in opposition voices would not improve the quality of debate (Mr Alvin Yeo), and that NCMPs did not have their own constituencies and would not be hindered by the need to be accountable (Mr Zaqy Mohamad and Ms Irene Ng). DPM Wong explained that the changes would give the opposition "a chance to articulate what they stand for [and to satisfy Singaporeans who]...want to see some real opposition MPs in Parliament".⁹⁹ NCMP Sylvia Lim opposed these changes as she felt they did not deal with issues she had with the electoral system like alleged gerrymandering.¹⁰⁰ Opposition MP Low Thia Kiang went further in promising to reject the NCMP post if he was not re-elected in the next term.¹⁰¹ In response to comments that these changes were merely a "charade", Minister Shanmugam said that NCMPs who performed well could go on to "become a more serious force in the next elections" and could "form a very credible caucus" with the size of nine.¹⁰²

The cooling-off day was criticised by opposition MPs as something "designed to disadvantage"¹⁰³ opposition parties (MP Chiam See Tong) and arrogantly assumed that Singaporeans would be irrational (NCMP Sylvia Lim).¹⁰⁴

Youth Olympic Games

In August, Singapore played host to the first Youth Olympic Games (YOG). The YOG enjoyed the enthusiastic participation of many, but received criticism for the way volunteers were treated, and for the way that the final bill to the public purse had well exceeded the estimated budget.

Along with coverage of how Singapore athletes were progressing in the games, there were stories on how volunteers had been served substandard meals at the games, how different groups received different portions and even that a few suffered food poisoning.¹⁰⁵ After the games, it was reported that tokens of appreciation for volunteers which were tickets to watch Formula One races did not reach them in time.¹⁰⁶

As the games were underway, members of the public complained that the arenas were only half-filled while those who wanted to watch the events were unable to get tickets to get in. It was explained that seats were empty because people who had been given tickets through government agencies did not show-up or other spectators might have left the venues early. The officials sprang into action to ensure that a fresh round of tickets were made available on the day itself after the events had started to do justice to the spaces left empty.¹⁰⁷

Spending on the YOG exceeded its original budget estimate of \$104 million at the final figure of \$387 million. Minister of Youth, Community Development and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan, attributed this discrepancy to a lack of experience in organising an event of this nature and scale, but he also urged the public to look at the figures which were relatively low in comparison to the expenditures for the Beijing Olympics (2008) and the Vancouver Winter Olympics (2010). He also reminded the public of the intangible and on-going benefits of being the hosts of the first YOG ever – that Singapore will always be referred to as such, that the international branding of Singapore as a beautiful, vibrant, dynamic creative city would attract businesses and visitors, and experiences and development of Singaporean athletes and sporting culture, were invaluable.¹⁰⁸

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg

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