

## IPS Young Singaporeans (Un)Conference 2016: What's Good?

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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has many conferences with the tried-and-tested format, where a moderator makes opening remarks that are followed by dialogues and panel presentations helmed by experts, and finally question-and-answer segments. But what happens if one key player — the audience — goes off script and turns the spotlight away from the podium?

This was the premise of the Young Singaporeans (Un)Conference (YSC) 2016 held on 21 September at the Pavilion at Far East Square, which gathered around 70 up-and-coming young Singaporeans across various fields. Moving away from the traditional conference format (which tends to privilege a top-down planning of the conference agenda), this year's edition of the [biennially-held YSC](#) was a participant-driven affair.

Participants were encouraged to engage in a range of free and open discussions around whatever issues they were interested in under the umbrella theme “What's Good?”.

“This is turning [the conference format] on its head, where participants get to set the agenda and parameters of what they want to talk about, so they can go on for as long as they want to or need to. This is sort of to give the participants more agency as well,” said YSC co-organiser Mok Cui Yin, an independent arts producer, on the rationale for bringing the [“Unconference” format](#) to YSC.

“What you also allow is for the possibility for more in-depth conversation and also a broader range of topics as opposed to traditional conference formats,” she added.

### How did the YSC “Unconference” work?



The participants decided on the topics of discussion at the conference. They could propose their own discussion topics at any time during the day, writing it down on the programme schedule — a board with a grid set up at the front of the room. Participants could join any session they liked.

Those who pitched their own sessions were called “lead participants” and were responsible for filling a summary sheet of the discussion, which they were asked to share with the whole group at the conclusion of the conference, known as the “closing circle”.

“There is no pre-programme, no pre-determined fixed topics. We have not organised any panels, no keynote speakers and guests of honour. Because all of you are really the guests of honour and the agenda will be set by all of you here today. It’s really up to you to make or break the conference,” lead organiser and IPS Adjunct Research Fellow Dr Hoe Su Fern explained in her introduction.

While the programme was kept to a minimal, in contrast, the space’s layout was purposefully developed. To facilitate introductions, chairs were placed in several circles in the centre of the space, in front of the conference grid. Surrounding this circle were eight areas marked A to H, where participants could hold their breakout sessions. A resource table with stationery was also provided to help participants conduct their sessions.



In anticipation of hesitation from the participants, there were nine featured participants who had planned their own breakout sessions and activities beforehand, though the brief given to them was fairly open. These were individuals selected to represent and seed diversity, each coming from very different parts of society including the civil service, arts and environmental advocacy. One selection criterion was that they had multiple roles. For instance, Amanda Chong is a Deputy Public Prosecutor by day, but she also writes poetry and runs ReadAble, a non-profit organisation that runs weekly literacy classes for children and migrant women in low-income communities.

“These were all deliberate choices, as we hoped that the featured participants would encourage the rest of the participants to unlearn, rethink and recondition ways we traditionally do things, such as conventional ways of attending conferences, introducing themselves and interacting with each other,” said Dr Hoe.

### ***Making connections and learning from others***

In that vein, icebreakers were crucial to ease participants into the Unconference format. One highlight of the day was the opening activity, which set the tone for the interactions. Led by featured participant and researcher Ng Huiying, participants were given a jar of raw vegetables and asked to add brine solution and whatever they wanted into the mixture.

Using the metaphor of fermentation for the Unconference, Huiying asked participants to think of the vegetables as our ideas. How our ideas develop depends on what we add to the jar; how we achieve what we conceive as good rests on having the right conditions for the future, she explained.



This exercise segued into the opening circle, where participants introduced themselves and the topics they were interested in discussing. As it turned out, participants warmed up to each other and the conference format quickly and the energy was palpable.

“I was very struck by how quickly people started connecting ideas, even during the introductions. People were saying, ‘like so and so, I do this’ or ‘I’m an introvert like this other person,’” observed Aaron Maniam, Director of the Industry Division at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, who was also one of the featured participants. “I think [it] was quite nice because I think it helps other people to see that we have things in common with others, even if they’re not immediately obvious.”

The programme grid filled up quickly, with a total of 18 sessions taking place during the day, including a dance improvisation session, theatre games on the power of labels and an in-depth discussion on the role of religion in Singapore. Some of the sessions included:

- *How can businesses be a force for good?* by Jessica Cheam, editor and founder of Eco-Business. Her session discussed the impact of businesses on society by asking participants what was the first thing they thought of when thinking about businesses. The session centred on models of sustainable development and also discussed the challenges faced by social enterprises in Singapore, in their bid to do good.
- *Making that thing from the future* by Veerappan Swaminathan and Aaron Maniam, social entrepreneur and civil servant, respectively. This session explored possible futures through creating objects to represent them. One key insight from the session was that when it came to questions of uncertainty, people would make plans for the future to do better today.
- *Inter-religious relations: Dealing with differences* by Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, a senior executive at the Harmony Centre. His session questioned the state of inter-religious relations in Singapore, and how we deal with challenges of increasing cultural complexity. The discussion also touched on diversity within seemingly monolithic religious groups.

At 22 years old, L Sakthisviaran, an IT student at Nanyang Polytechnic was one of the youngest participants at the conference. Despite his initial apprehension, thinking other participants might view him as “some young guy with crazy ideas,” he was one of the first people to initiate his own breakout session.

“As a young person, when we get this kind of opportunity, we want to see what older people have to say about [the future of our nation], find out their thoughts and whether they are worried, and if they are, the kind of worries they have,” he said.

### ***Discovering and making what's good***

In keeping with the theme, the conference featured healthy snacks provided by social enterprises. There was a free flow of coffee from Betr Barista and different varieties of fruit, nut and cracker snacks from BoxGreen. Biodegradable plates were used for lunch and a communal stationery table was set up.

Even outside of the breakout sessions and Unconference environment, the small conversations in between proved to be valuable learning lessons for the participants. Jorain Ng from the Disabled People's Association said, “I feel very happy to be here and I'm really learning a lot. Many people have really interesting ideas that I've never thought of — for instance, what is a good life and what are the values that make it... Good life equals to happiness, for instance.”

The real-world application of a question as broad as “what's good” was not lost on participants either, as Jorain shared, “I'm actually working on a research project on people with disabilities, so I want to find out what exactly is a good life for people with disabilities, and if they can achieve it... I think I can learn a lot right now and feed into my bureaucracy work.”



With so many different sessions going on at the same time, not one participant left the Unconference with the same experience. Of the 53 people who gave their feedback, 79% felt that they had gained new insights and perspectives while 57% said they would follow up

on what had been discussed during the day. A number of participants also said some structure and sub-themes would be helpful, including having set goals for each session. Many commented that the format was a refreshing change from the usual conference format.

In spite of the multifariousness of the day's proceedings, several themes on "what's good" recurred throughout, as conference co-organiser Johannes Hadi noted in the closing circle: Negotiation, power of self-organisation, and the enduring power of time to make things better. IPS Director Janadas Devan used the metaphor of polyphony to describe the conference: different voices coming together to produce one coherent piece of music.

As Cui Yin summed up, "Ultimately, this open space format is about trust. The Unconference principle is that whatever happens will happen. Whoever comes is the right kind of people, whatever time is the right time, whatever happens is the only thing that could happen, and when it is over, it is over. It is the idea of going with the flow and being organic, and responding to whatever occurs. The only thing that can go wrong is that if people come expecting to be taught something, as opposed to not giving something."

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