

Changing definition of success in education system a way for S'pore to stay relevant: Chan Chun Sing

Chan said that the need for Singapore's education system to evolve was clear.

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Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing gave the opening speech of the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) flagship Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference on Jan. 5.

Chan highlighted five key shifts needed to ensure that Singapore's education system can remain relevant in an increasingly "connected, yet fragmented world".

A changing society

Chan opened by talking about the challenging and constantly changing environment that Singapore and Singaporeans find themselves in.

Going forward, society will be shaped by various forces.

As Singapore faces a slowing birth rate, Chan pointed out the growing challenge to integrate non-local born citizens to sustain the country's economic vibrance and social cohesion.

"For Singapore, managing diversity and being able to connect and collaborate are essentials, not options," he said.

Singapore will also face increasing competitive pressures as it becomes more integrated with the rest of the world, and will need to "counter the tendencies to turn insular, nativist, and retreat into our own echo- chambers".

Additionally, Chan acknowledged that there is a greater risk of "us seeing the world as we want it, rather than as it is", which will threaten Singapore's ability to connect and remain relevant with the world.

To meet these challenges, Chan said Singapore's education system needs to "evolve at speed".

He said Singapore's education system needs to deliver curiosity, collaboration, and confidence at the individual level.

At the industry level, it needs to help companies connect better across geographies, geopolitics, and culture, and to remain competitive.

At the societal level, Singapore's education system will also need to be cohesive enough to move "against the forces that threaten to fragment us".

Five key shifts

In order to achieve this, Chan highlighted five "key shifts" to deliver these outcomes.

- Moving beyond mass access to education to mass customisation
- Defining success beyond the first 15 years of education, but also in the next 50 years
- More closely intertwining the Academia-Industry partnership into a relationship
- Going beyond the efforts of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to the efforts of society as a whole
- Investing in lifelong learning and innovation for the teaching fraternity

1. Mass access to quality education

Lauding Singapore's strong basic system that allowed mass access to quality education, Chan noted three things that the education system needed to improve on in this area.

Firstly, stronger investments in early year education, especially for less privileged children of families with higher needs.

Chan cited evidence which showed that it was important not to let the learning and developmental gap to grow too wide in young children, as it would be difficult to rectify, and remediation required in the future would be extremely high.

While celebrating the progress made in closing the gap over the past 15 years, he said there is still more to do, and shared that the government will examine new ways to provide support for these less privileged children.

Secondly, the government will use more adaptive learning technologies and pedagogies to "stretch the top, while freeing up resources to uplift the disadvantaged".

New technologies such as artificial intelligence would allow Singapore to relook its pedagogies to enable even better mass customisation of the education system.

Thirdly, Singapore will continue to diversify its success pathways for students, through programs like Full Subject Based Banding, and customisation of degree programmes, amongst other things.

Chan said a more diverse education system would better serve Singapore, but would require a mindset shift away from constant comparison and benchmarking of students and institutions.

There is also a need to keep Singapore's meritocracy broad and continuous, and not allow the "system to degenerate into credentialism".

2. Beyond schooling years

Chan said that success cannot be defined by the 15 years spent in formal education, but would have to shift to be defined by the 50 years beyond that.

Disruptions and uncertainty meant that it would not be possible to frontload education, and the first 15 years of education would be to build learning foundations.

Instead, the new benchmarks for success will be "the spirit of inquiry, the desire to create new knowledge and value, the ability to discover, discern and distil".

Chan said industry would have a part to play in achieving lifelong learning — industry cannot wait for the “perfect worker”, but must be an active partner in shaping students' interest and skillsets before they even enter the workforce.

Industry will also need to work with academia to keep training workers after joining the workforce.

The government would also review funding and support for lifelong learning, to better guide those in the middle of their careers through challenges and opportunities, to defray costs, help smoothen transitions in and out of jobs, and skills acquisition.

Chan said that more ideas would be put forth during the Forward Singapore deliberations.

3. Academia-industry relations

Chan said the third shift would be in the relationship between academia and industry in Singapore.

Singapore cannot outcompete other countries in scale, but can be pioneers at intersections of disciplines, and thus create new value, he added.

This means being adept at forming interdisciplinary teams across students, faculty, and alumni, and collaboration between institutions and faculties.

Chan spoke about the Research-Innovation-Enterprise cycle, saying Singapore had done well in research, but needed to improve in the latter two aspects.

Other than universities, Chan also highlighted the connection between industry and polytechnics/Institute of Technical Education.

He said that they would need to work together to help students and lifelong learners to better integrate work and study, and allow a better flow of research and practices between learners and industry.

4. Beyond the efforts of MOE to whole of society

Chan said that the MOE never believed it alone could change society or develop future generations.

To broaden the definition of success, MOE needs to work closely with parents, community partners and industries, or its efforts would ultimately be "undone", and Singapore's speed of change would be measured in generations, not years.

To that end, he said that only by rallying together could Singapore build a culture that appreciates diverse learners.

Industry also has to close the remuneration gap, compensating according to skills and contribution, not credentials.

Success, he said, was “everyone doing justice to their blessings, rather than everyone chasing the same yardstick.”

5. Teaching the teachers

The final shift to improve the education system will be how Singapore equips and organises the teaching faculty.

Teachers are not just academics, transmitters of information, or only engaging mainstream students with established pedagogies.

They need to be facilitators of discovery and learning, to support "higher needs" children and families, reaching and nurturing students with special education needs, by exploring and developing new pedagogies.

As new skillsets cannot be frontloaded, teachers would likewise need to upskill and reskill continuously.

Educators would need to understand the world beyond the education system, understand its changes, and bring back new perspectives to teaching.

Chan cited the Teacher Work Attachment Plus programme as a way to facilitate that.

In a similar way, Singapore needs to ensure teaching ability and pedagogical practices of teaching faculties in institutes of higher or continuous learning.

Chan said that the Institute of Adult Learning would join the National Institute of Education and National Institute of Early Childhood Development; providing investment, research, and training to the teaching faculties at all levels.

For Institutes of Higher Learning, there is likewise a need to define success beyond research.

Chan said that there should be complementary pathways to success in teaching as well as leadership, in addition to research.

In closing, Chan highlighted the need for Singapore universities and education system to reach their fullest potential. He spoke about a conceptual “Education 4.0”.

Where the first three versions of education moved from catering to the privileged, then to industry, then to universal access, "Education 4.0" would need to equip Singaporeans to thrive in an uncertain, fragmented, diverse and competitive, yet more connected world.

The aforementioned five key shifts are required for this, but Chan also noted the importance of the government remaining committed to "build the best system possible to enable future generations of Singaporeans to do even better than this generation".

"What will also not change is our goal to distinguish ourselves as a nation that defines success not just by our achievements, but by our contributions," he concluded.