

Singapore Perspectives 2023: Work
Panel 1: Keynote Speech on the Role of Education and Lifelong Learning in the Future Economy

By Sandy Lee and Wynn Tan

The Institute of Policy Studies' annual flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives, seeks each year to engage thinking Singaporeans in a lively debate on the country's policy challenges. The theme for this year was "Work", with discussions focusing on how disruptions and trends in technology, socio-economic developments and Singapore's demographics would shape the future of work.

Minister for Education Mr Chan Chun Sing launched the conference with a keynote address on the future of the world, how it affects Singapore, and how the Singapore education system can be adapted to ensure that it remains relevant to the changing nature of work. The ensuing Q&A session was moderated by Ms Priscillia Yeong, Deputy Director for Learning and Professional Development at the National Council of Social Services.



Caption for photo: Minister for Education, Chan Chun Sing delivering his keynote address at the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2023 Conference

Education as a Lifelong Endeavour

Mr Chan began his speech by talking about how good outcomes are not the result of good policies enacted in the short term, but a consistent application of these policies with conviction. In the same way, approaches towards good education policies need to be able to identify the forces that shape the world, and the challenges and opportunities that will confront us. This will then provide a clear vision of how to create an education system that is relevant to the times.

Future of the World and Impacts on Singapore

People will be more connected across the digital, physical and production spaces. People and nations who are able to master such modes of connectivity will have an edge in attracting creative, efficient and resilient talent and investments.

However, the world will also be more fragmented on the geopolitical, trade, technological and ideological fronts. With the absence of rules-based institution and platforms for cooperation to manage emerging global challenges, Singapore will be faced with a world of heightened uncertainties, insecurities and inequalities.

These global patterns will influence Singapore society. Singapore will become more diverse in individual backgrounds and aspirations, and the ability to manage this diversity is important to sustain our economic vibrance and social cohesion. We will also need to be able to work with people from other countries, cultures and political systems.

Singaporeans will also face greater competitive pressures due to our integration with the world. Citizens need to recognise that Singapore cannot shield ourselves from competition. Instead, Singapore needs to find ways to thrive and hone a competitive edge in this ever more competitive environment. One of which is the skill to discover, distil and discern large volumes of information.

With the successes that Singapore has achieved, it is easy to adopt an idealistic view of the world and assume that the government will be able to protect citizens from the harsh realities that threaten important economic ties and the need to remain relevant. Hence, it is vital that through education, Singaporeans will come to understand the world accurately.

Future of Work

Mr Chan then talked about the future of work, where work is increasingly defined by the 3Ds — digital, disruption and connected dispersion. The ability to master digital skills will define Singapore's competitiveness as individuals, companies and a country. Disruptions will occur more frequently and in different spaces, which means that Singaporeans would need to work and upskill frequently.

Connected dispersion presents the new norm of remote work, facilitated by digital connectivity. The possibilities of remote work allow now for greater connection to the global talent pool, to harness these skills for Singapore's competitiveness on the global stage. Connected dispersion allows now for work to be done asynchronously. This is especially so for the new generation, whose lifestyle and aspirations will reflect these approaches towards work.

Hence, the ability to learn and work in both structured and asynchronous and decentralised contexts will be an important skill to cultivate. Employers should also adopt a mindset shift in organising work and education to adapt to the evolving approaches towards work.

Future of Education

Mr Chan then spoke about the corresponding impact on the future of work and the urgent need for the Singapore education system to evolve to meet these different demands. The goal of the Singapore education system is to cultivate curious, collaborative, confident, contributing and continuously learning individuals. These will allow for industries to be connected and competitive; and Singapore to be cohesive and compassionate.

Curiosity is crucial for Singapore to anticipate and frame future challenges, and develop timely and relevant solutions to create new value. Collaboration brings together people from various disciplines, cultures and geographies to work together as a team and value-add to a fragmenting and fractious world. Confidence is important for bringing out the best in every individual, to make Singapore a more cohesive and compassionate society.

However, to truly nurture resilience and build confidence in our young people to face an uncertain and untidy world, it is important to not over-structure, over-provide or over-protect them as that will deprive them of the opportunities to grow and learn.

The education system must also help companies better connect and evolve to stay competitive by equipping students with the skillsets to connect across geographies, geopolitics and cultures. Students will be exposed to diverse cultures abroad and in local institutions, as well as be given opportunities to explore unconventional pathways.

Singapore's success is dependent on the collective effort across the different generations. Individual success is not by dint of personal effort and intelligence, but also in part the opportunities that the system and our predecessors have created for us. There needs to be a societal ethos to help the less privileged to build the networks and ties critical to achieving success. How much one is able to contribute to the larger group must be a measure of success.

Key Shifts in the Education System

Mr Chan then focused on the five key shifts to deliver on the goals of education and lifelong learning:

The first shift to ensure that there is mass access and mass customisation. The Ministry of Education is looking at ways to ensure that education is accessible to the majority, especially for less privileged children and families with higher needs. Adaptive learning technologies and data-driven pedagogies will allow curriculum to be tailored to the individual students. There will also be an increase in choices for subjects, greater flexibility in subjects through Full Subject Based Banding and customisation of degree programmes. These changes will ensure that the education system produces a good diversity of individuals with different strengths and skills.

The second shift is that Singapore needs to define success beyond the first 15 years in schools and into the next 50 years, to cultivate a spirit of inquiry and desire to create new knowledge. Industries are encouraged to be an active partner with schools to shape students' skill sets and interests, and to continue training them rather than to wait for the "perfect worker" to be created. The ministry will also review the existing funding and support of lifelong education, particularly for the mid-career individuals through the Forward Singapore deliberations.

The third shift is to tighten the nexus between industry and academia to ensure that individuals are trained to be able to work in inter-disciplinary teams to create new value. While we have done well in the research domain, Singapore should also focus on innovation and enterprise. This can be achieved through stronger partnerships between industries and universities, polytechnics and ITEs.

The fourth shift relates to leveraging the diversity of strengths from society, alongside our understanding of success. Aside from the ministry, groups such as parents, community partners and industries need to work together to build a culture that appreciates diversity in students rather to hold on to a single, fixed definition of success. This must also be reflected in the remuneration structure by narrowing the remuneration gap between graduates and non-graduates.

The last shift pertains to the teaching faculty. Currently, educators play diverse roles that go beyond teaching duties. This would require them to acquire new skill sets through exposure in other organisations. The Institute of Adult Learning will serve as an important pillar of the teaching fraternity's professional development and provide opportunities for success beyond research, and in the teaching and leadership spheres.

In conclusion, Mr Chan said that his ministry is committed to build the best system possible for Singaporeans. This will be guided by the principle that success is not just by achievements, but by contributions as well.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: How will we be able to work towards the mindset shifts of students, parents, educators, or employers?

A: Mr Chan stated that changing structures, processes, and policies is easier, but the most important and challenging change is mindset. He explained that a mindset can be divided into three parts: individuals, industries, and institutions. Regarding individuals, Singaporeans are practical and understand the need for continuous re-skilling and up-skilling. Mr Chan emphasised the importance of knowing how to achieve this while balancing family and financial responsibilities. The government is exploring ways to collaborate with industries and institutions to facilitate lifelong learning. The Ministry of Education is considering creating a "skills passport" system to identify what skills individuals possess and what gaps they need to fill to transition into new careers. Mr Chan emphasised the need for individuals to have a sense of urgency to stay relevant and acquire targeted skills.

Regarding industries, Mr Chan stressed the importance of shifting away from the concept of a "perfect worker" and towards continuous upgrading of workers. He stated that disruptions in industries make it challenging to invest in worker training, but a stagnant talent pool will result if training is not provided. Lastly, he explained that institutions must deliver modules and design micro-credentials and stackable modules that enable people to acquire skills at scale and speed. He highlighted the need for redesigning pedagogies to appeal to learners from different age groups and emphasised that a mindset shift is necessary for individuals, industries, and institutions.

Q: Would you consider nationalising preschools right from the start so that we can level the playing field for our very young children regardless of their backgrounds?

A: Mr Chan said that the government is working towards supporting the bulk of preschools directly or indirectly. There are different models such as the MOE Kindergarten system, anchor operator schemes including PCF, NTUC, and three other anchor operators, as well as different operator schemes. Mr Chan emphasized the need for a diversity of models that cater to the diverse learning needs of children at a young age. He wants to focus on strengthening efforts for higher needs children from high needs families and does not believe in a one-size-fits-all approach. Mr Chan also wants to improve the transition between preschools and primary schools to offer a seamless experience.

Q: Given the need to move away from a single point in time assessment and new markers of success, will we be accelerating our move away from examinations?

A: Mr Chan said that exams have a role in education, but their purpose must be clear. They are meant to be a self-evaluation tool for individuals to understand their strengths and weaknesses, while also allowing the education system to provide appropriate resources for their learning needs. Exams are not meant to sort people into different paths, but to help them succeed in the next phase of learning. Mr Chan also highlighted the importance of adaptive learning enabled by technology, which allows for focused and targeted teaching to improve students' weaker areas. He stressed the need for a cultural shift from incessant comparison to individual improvement, where the benchmark of success is whether the person has done well relative to themselves and their past performance. The goal is to keep surpassing oneself throughout life, learning and improving continuously.

Q: How do you see progress made on the social cohesion front both on the income groups and race or ethnic perspectives and between the two, which is more challenging?

A: Mr Chan said that the issue of stratification is a constant challenge for societies. In Singapore, the goal is to support individuals in achieving their full potential, regardless of their starting points, while also emphasising the responsibility to give back to society. Resources should be allocated to help those who are behind and uplift the bottom without capping the top. In addition, Singapore must develop skills to find convergence among diverse ideas and build character that enables others to succeed. Education should not only transmit content but also inculcate values. Success in Singapore is defined by how individuals enable others to succeed and do better, especially the next generation.

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