

Parliament: Liberal education makes for better citizens: NMP Walter Theseira

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The Straits Times, 8 October 2019

Such an education teaches youth to examine information critically, says Walter Theseira.

Many Singaporeans have expressed concern recently about liberal education, but such an education can also create better and more active citizens, said Nominated MP Walter Theseira.

Calling on the Government to expand liberal education beyond institutions like Yale-NUS College, Associate Professor Theseira said yesterday that such an education develops critical thinking and provides "a foundation for lifelong learning and citizenship".

He made the points in Parliament in an adjournment motion that allows an MP to talk on a subject for 20 minutes towards the end of the sitting.

Earlier in the day, several MPs had raised questions about the recent cancellation of a module on dissent and resistance at Yale-NUS, a liberal arts institution.

Prof Theseira acknowledged many Singaporeans were concerned, pointing to a commentary on the issue in Chinese-language newspaper Lianhe Zaobao by former PAP MP Goh Choon Kang.

The commentary had expressed concern about a "colour revolution" and that impressionable students may be incited to destabilise the nation.

Such worries are not new, Prof Theseira said, pointing to ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who was accused of corrupting Athenian youth and executed.

But like other educational philosophies, a liberal education simply aims to cultivate a good human being and citizen, he said.

"What is distinctive is that a liberal education holds the student responsible for their own intellectual development," he said, adding that it does so by teaching students to examine information critically rather than accept it blindly.

He also raised concerns on whether Singaporean academics would be afraid to teach contentious topics, such as dissent, inequality and social injustice, and be biased towards "the safe and the status quo".

"It encourages a sloppiness of thinking, a belief that it is safer to regurgitate received wisdom than to seek new answers. This will be bad for our youth and bad for Singapore."

The benefits of a liberal education extend beyond the classroom, he added, noting that the liberal values of open-mindedness tempered by critical inquiry can help Singaporeans deal with the complexities of a changing world.

"Our democracy is at risk if the electorate is unable to critically assess facts, policies and ideas, leading to the politics of fear and misinformation," he said, arguing that a liberal education can help address this gap.

He also gave examples of how such an education can lead to student activism that addresses social injustices, like Yale-NUS student Lim Jingzhou's Cassia Resettlement Team. The youth-led group conducts house visits to check on Cassia Crescent's elderly and vulnerable residents. Many require help with daily needs like buying groceries or taking their medicine.

Fellow NMP Anthea Ong, taking up the remaining time for the motion, called on the Government to rethink its attitude towards youth advocacy, noting the "lukewarm" official response to the recent Singapore Climate Rally at Hong Lim Park.

In particular, its Youth Action Plan needs to involve young people in policy-making processes, from feedback to testing and fine-tuning policies, she added.

She also said young people should be able to choose their representatives on the Youth Action Panel.

Ms Ong cited remarks by Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference last Tuesday, when he said Singapore will "languish if its lovers are uncritical and its critics are unloving".

"To turn many of these critical young lovers away and deny them their say would be a great loss for our country. Let's give our young ones space to challenge, roots to lead and reasons to stay."