

(From left in photo) ST senior education correspondent Sandra Davie, Acting Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung, SMU president Arnoud De Meyer and ST deputy editor Ignatius Low engaging in a lively discussion with the audience at The Straits Times Education Forum 2016 yesterday.
 ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI



Youth must chart own paths

Acting Education Minister says Govt careful not to 'overplan' their future

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Singapore has come far in offering a diverse range of opportunities for students. But the Government also has to be mindful not to "overplan" and instead, give youth ample space to chart their own paths towards their goals.

Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung highlighted this point yesterday in his closing remarks at The Straits Times Education Forum 2016, which saw spirited exchanges emerge with about 250 participants over issues such as the relevance of university education and how students should be assessed.

Still, the Government can help nudge society away from its fixation on the paper chase by taking practical steps such as the recent

expansion of aptitude-based admissions in polytechnics and local universities, said Mr Ong.

When asked by ST senior education correspondent Sandra Davie on how Singapore can evolve from a system that is preoccupied with grades and the type of university degree, Mr Ong said that in the absence of a better metric, academic qualification has been adopted as a proxy to measure employment suitability. This is being corrected at the tertiary level with aptitude-based admissions. But companies also need to change their human resource policies in order for different talents to be valued. Certain government departments, including the Ministry of Education, have already started this, he said.

ST deputy editor Ignatius Low, who moderated the panel discussion, which also included Singapore

Management University (SMU) president Arnoud De Meyer, asked how an American-style "UnCollege" movement – in which students reject a formal education in favour of real-world experience and street cred – might play out here.

Mr Ong said this is why universities need to stay ahead of change before it becomes "a problem". The premium still placed on degrees here reflects the steps that Singapore has taken to prevent a graduate glut from occurring, unlike in South Korea and Taiwan.

The cohort participation rate in local universities, which currently hovers at 33 per cent, will rise gradually to 40 per cent by 2020, maintaining a balance between meeting aspirations for university education while keeping its value intact.

Weighing in on a question by an SMU student on how university grading can be changed to become more relevant to the industry, Professor De Meyer said that this involves more than just grading students on exam scripts. SMU, for in-

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stance, uses peer evaluation within project teams, in which students assess each other based on contribution and capabilities.

Mr Low asked Prof De Meyer if it would be possible for students to obtain academic credits for outside work, for instance an in-depth journalistic feature that is published in ST during an internship. He replied that this was something the university could take into consideration – a flexible approach which Mr Ong said was very encouraging.

But he also steered the discussion on assessment and evaluation towards a deeper point about motivation. "Actually, if you are really interested in journalism, you should be

dying to write that feature, whether it will earn you a credit or not... It is important to get evaluated, but also understand that not everything that is important can get evaluated."

While some may point out that it could be tricky for society to embrace change, given that it is a chicken-and-egg situation, Mr Ong is confident that it will happen because of the younger generation's changing view of what is important to them. "My sense, when interacting with them... is that they have much stronger altruistic values. They want to do something different, they want to make life better for the person next to them."

ST editor Warren Fernandez said that the insights shared at the forum made for "a very lively discussion with our audience".

"This is precisely what the ST Education Forum is meant to be – a chance for our readers to engage on a topic that matters to them," he said.

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Encouragement for risk-takers

How can Singapore as a society encourage risk-taking, and through policies and resources, better support and empower those willing to forsake a degree to chase new opportunities?

An earnest question posed by a Dunman High School student generated much laughter at the forum yesterday when Singapore Management University president Arnoud De Meyer cheekily blew his own horn, quipping: "Come to SMU!"

He followed up by telling her to "just go for it", adding: "Don't always ask what society can do for me to help me... Singapore is a society where you can take risks."

Straits Times senior education correspondent Sandra Davie cited the three young co-founders of recruitment website Glints as an example of students who have chosen to "buck the trend, and do something different".

When they launched Glints in January 2014, Mr Seah Ying Cong, Mr Oswald Yeo and Mr Looi Qin En were prepared to give up spots at top universities and business schools to focus on the company.

One year later, they secured \$475,000 of seed money for their start-up.

Mr Seah, 23, told the forum: "We had to go against what the system imposed on us initially, convincing our parents and explaining to counsellors at our universities why we were going to take a leave of absence."

"Even though we understand that there is resistance from the system, it's more about how the system was built for the majority."

He added that getting the go-ahead to pursue this less trodden path was "simply a matter of asking for permission, and forgiveness" while taking the self-initiative to experiment.

Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung advised students: "You will be an outlier. But every society in its evolutionary process will require such risk-takers."

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