

Soft skills crucial, but being competitive not a bad thing

The question-and-answer segment of The Straits Times Education Forum yesterday, which lasted about 30 minutes, saw a lively exchange between audience members and the debaters.

Below are two questions from the floor and the answers that touched on identifying those with good soft skills for a job and why being competitive is not the same as pursuing grades.

Q *While it is easy to identify what degree someone graduated with, it is hard to identify the soft skills they possess.*

How can people who are good in certain soft skills be identified in the marketplace by prospective employers?

Andreas Schleicher It's true that just because you have a degree qualification, it doesn't automatically imply that you have the social skills.

Employers are often good at recognising knowledge and skills. There are also instruments now that can help employers look at a broad range of cognitive ability and social skills.

We need to become better at observing the competence which people actually have at the workplace.

If you look at some employers from high-tech companies, they are actually quite good at that already.

Q *Due to the competitive mindset of the current society, especially in a country like Singapore, a lot of us focus on getting a top grade.*

Does that, in the end, have a negative effect on our personal and social development in university?

Arnoud De Meyer I think grades are important as they tell you something about what you're good and bad at.

But pursuing grades is wrong.

To be competitive is okay, because the world is competitive. It actually prepares you for a competitive world.

In the professional world, not everybody will get a pass grade. Some of us will do better than others.

It is an obligation, I think, for the university to give you a feeling of where you're standing among your peers.

wrong?" Prof Goh asked students seated in the 500-strong audience.

"Maybe your form teacher gets angry, maybe some of your friends get angry with you. But transport yourself to the workplace. What if you make a key decision in the workplace and you get it wrong? You have very real-life consequences. People get fired, people's lives get affected in a very serious way."

He said that being in a university pursuing a degree gives students a safe experience to learn social skills, such as making judgments and decisions, and, more importantly, the chance to learn from mistakes.

Fabian Koh