

# Meritocracy and its toll on our students

Two volumes of writings by undergraduates highlight young people's anxieties over success and failure.

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Poverty, inequality, social mobility, meritocracy and the role of Singapore's education system have been the subject of many commentaries in the past year. Most focused on low-income workers and families.

Young university students and the challenges they face have attracted less attention, perhaps because they are the assumed "winners" of a meritocratic paper chase.

Our discussion here draws on more than 300 submissions that business undergraduates at Singapore Management University (SMU) wrote for a capstone class in their final year. They could choose any topic, including introspecting about their life in and beyond SMU. More than a third of these

submissions were published in two volumes – *Making Sense Of Life* (2017) and *Still Making Sense Of Life* (2018) – selected to reflect the wide range of voices and topics.

Many are auto-ethnographies, personal stories, which may not be representative or generalisable but will resonate with others who share similar experiences.

They confirm the positive role that SMU (and other universities) plays in social mobility in Singapore. Most of the student writers come from middle-income families with non-graduate parents. Many say their families are "not well-off" and some, that family finances are "tight".

But none suffered from a lack of basic needs, such as food and housing, or had to rely on state welfare support for daily needs. Nearly all acknowledge they were materially well cared for and provided with private tuition and, for some, various "luxuries" such as gaming equipment, extra-curricular

classes and branded consumer goods. Direct experience of absolute or relative poverty is lacking and many say they are in a more fortunate economic position than their parents were when young.

Many entered SMU through the polytechnic route, not junior colleges. They had attended neighbourhood, not elite, primary or secondary schools, including several from the Normal stream. Their families obviously did not need them to forgo or drop out of four years of further education to support them, but a few mention they are eager to start working so they can contribute to family finances.

Students highlight distinctive aspects of their SMU education as contributing to their personal and professional development and career goals – most notably, interactive classroom pedagogy, internships, the community service requirement and especially international exchange experiences. These opportunities, they say, enhanced their preparation for work, attractiveness to employers and eventual climb up the income ladder.

There were intangible benefits too. One student from the Normal stream, after volunteering for a community project in Cambodia, asks: "How is it possible for the villagers to have so little and yet have so much? I have everything that they do not have, yet I feel that my life is lacking in one way or another. The experience taught me to look at life from a different perspective instead of only my own."

Few contributors express, in class or in their essays, reservations about meritocracy. Most accept the national and dominant family narrative – that success comes from doing well academically and working hard. A few question the societal and familial definition of success in purely material terms. Some note that SMU business students are more materially self-centred than those in other schools, with less interest in public service or non-profit work.

A few took the path less travelled. One decided to be a teacher after hearing "everyone's

take on life and their values". Another chose to work for a refugee agency, writing: "I neglect my mother and family for the greater good by working in a sector that strives to feed the hungry, shelter the displaced and empower the poor".

Some recognise that luck played a major role in their landing a plum job. Absent was a sense of entitlement; instead, humility and modesty were evident. Students did not credit their success to superior personal qualities such as intelligence, talent or eloquence.

## OPPORTUNITY COST OF SUCCESS

There is, however, a keen sense of the opportunity cost of this success. Meritocracy does take a toll on family relationships. As some students see it, their parents work extremely hard and long hours, demanding and expecting in return only outstanding academic performance. To them, it seems that every resource, nearly every interpersonal interaction, is to ensure the material success of the

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A good number of student contributors feel emotionally neglected, with an unmet yearning for unconditional love and acceptance by parents for who they are. They regret lost time not spent together unrelated to the collective goal, and feel that their parents do not understand, appreciate or even love them, since their worth as children is defined largely in terms of academic results. It may not be coincidental that many find in organised religion a source of comfort and place for fellowship with others.

Some students also see how the struggle for financial goals beyond mere survival causes tension within and between parents, resulting in marital discord and even break-up. They are acutely aware of the pain in a less-successful parent's poignant exhortation of "don't be like me".

Parents are responding to external incentives in the wider economy and society, and children, to the school system that sorts them for future roles in it. A close second to family pressures in student ruminations is exam performance, starting from the PSLE, and going through the O levels, A levels and the last semester at SMU.

A remarkable number remember their exact grade for every subject at every examination, and associated GPAs (grade point averages). They vividly recall their own and their parents' reactions to the grades, and related dreams and nightmares. Many express their surprise and gratitude over being accepted into SMU's business school, despite mediocre grades, because SMU assesses applicants on their whole portfolio of skills, interests and experiences.

It is a rare student who mentions anything akin to a "love of learning", or something learnt in school or university which excited and inspired the next stage of his or her education or professional choice. Even co-curricular activities are mentioned less with enthusiasm or genuine interest than as another "resume requirement" to make it to the next gate.

For one overachieving student,

her college years became "a tick-box exercise". She held leadership roles and excelled in academic and non-academic areas, driven by "a perpetual desire to be respected and admired". But her achievements isolated her from others, leading her to remark: "What a way to end my 16 years of formal education."

How students dealt with these dual family and school pressures as vulnerable teenagers and young adults is revealing. Many mention periods when they felt life was "meaningless" and exhibited symptoms of depression; several had suicidal thoughts and a couple of them or their siblings even attempted suicide. A few "escaped" by turning to and becoming addicted to gambling, alcohol, smoking or sex.

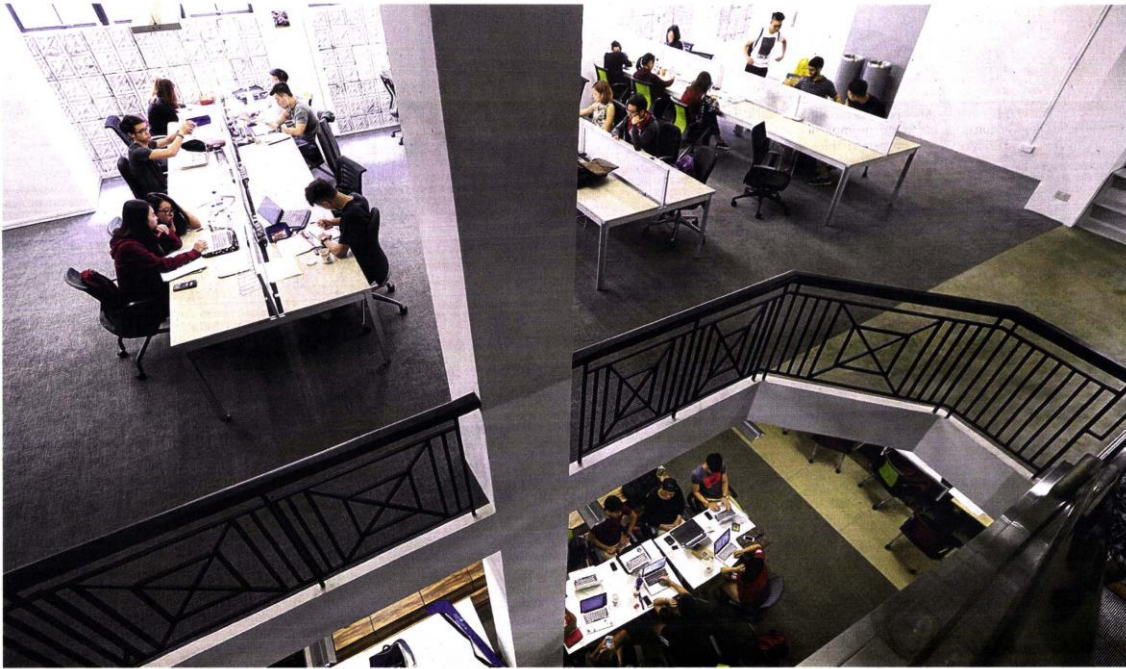
On the positive side, some channelled their energies into competitive sports, kickboxing, biking and dancing. In their final semester, the majority share a sense of accomplishment at having overcome many struggles, and an affecting sense of gratitude to their parents, friends and SMU. One notes that she looks to her future life with a "bittersweet mix of relief, anticipation and apprehension".

What should one make of such views from students?

It is true SMU business students may be "self-selected" to be more driven towards material success, their "dream jobs" narrowly limited to financial service, marketing and other corporate executive positions. But they often feel like they had "no choice" in this selection process – some explicitly so, following family dictates or because they failed to get admitted into another preferred field. Those who chose the programme seemed to do so for practical reasons ("to get a good, high-paying job"), rather than for any intrinsic motivation. They are simply following the path of meritocracy, Singapore style, to which they have been inured since childhood.

But if these essays are reflective of how other students feel, we wonder if there is another way of raising and educating our young that might exact less opportunity cost, and allow young Singaporeans

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Among the Singapore Management University undergraduates who wrote essays for a capstone class in their final year, a good number of these student contributors feel that their parents do not understand, appreciate or even love them, since their worth as children is defined largely in terms of academic results. ST FILE PHOTO

to earlier and more fully discover their true selves, exploring and accessing different pathways rather than being propelled on an escalator whose speed is set by others?

From these essays, it appears that students pondering alternatives did so after encountering different ways of being, living and working in other countries, through SMU's international exchange programmes. One such student, after meeting people from different backgrounds, realises "we were all unique in our own special ways and society's perception of what is good or better is just an opinion".

In many ways, undergraduates in Singapore exemplify the pragmatic bent of our society. In class, existential puzzles did not engross them any more than they did undergraduates during our time, half a century ago.

Yet many in the older generation may not appreciate the hard choices the young today, and their families, must contend with in a society dedicated to promoting material prosperity. On their part, young graduates – even as they struggle with achievement, success and stress in our hyper-competitive society – will find their own ways of behaving, believing, becoming and being themselves, making their own good sense of life as it unfolds for them.

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