

PSC chairman highlights value of diversity in Singapore public service

The chairman of the Public Service Commission, Mr Eddie Teo, has written an open letter highlighting the value of diversity in the Singapore public service.

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File photo: A general view of the Singapore skyline.

SINGAPORE: The Public Service Commission (PSC) has spoken out on how it guards against elitism and the need for diversity in Singapore's public service.

Its chairman Eddie Teo said in an open letter that the public service needs to avoid "group think" as Singapore's changing demographics sees national challenges become more complex.

The PSC oversees the appointment and promotion of key public sector leaders and diversity has always been something it has considered.

But now, there seems to be a greater emphasis.

Mr Teo said: "The PSC's effort to bring diversity into the public service will come to nought if divergent views are discouraged within the system and those who dare to question assumptions and have a non-conventional perspective are not valued and appreciated."

He said the PSC sought diversity by selecting scholarship holders from a variety of schools and backgrounds, sending them to study in different courses and countries, and ensuring candidates are selected based on a broad definition of merit.

However, perceptions persist that the public service places too much emphasis on students' academic grades.

Observers said perhaps there is some truth to that.

Over the past 10 years, 68 per cent of scholars came from Raffles Institution and Hwa Chong, two of Singapore's top schools in terms of academic results.

This peaked in 2007, at 82 per cent. In the past two years, they comprised 60 per cent of the total cohort.

But things seem to be changing.

The Sports School had its first President's Scholar this year and Pioneer Junior College has produced two PSC Scholars over the past 3 years.

Pioneer said the PSC's outreach effort has also been more concerted over the years.

Pioneer's principal Tan-Kek Lee Yong said: "I think PSC is shifting, they have been connecting with schools to let us know about the criteria for selection and they do ask us for (the students') CCA (Co-curricular activity) records as well. So nowadays, when we put up a list of students to consider... we look at their character, their CCA contribution as well. If it's a move towards this direction, you will see a lot more variety coming on board.

"They (PSC) even sent us their scholarship executive attached to the school. I had one last year and he spent quite a long time -- two weeks with us. He actually interacted with students, chat with my potential scholars, (talked about) opportunities in the civil service. I thought that was really very good."

Three students from Nanyang Junior College have also received PSC scholarships.

Nanyang's Scholars Development Programme teacher-in-charge Chng Yong Xi said: "I think it (PSC scholarship) also acts as a form of motivation for a lot of our students, especially students from maybe the middle income families, it acts as a motivation for them to really do well, to excel in various areas in school."

Mr Teo said the PSC has been redefining its concept of merit over the years.

He said in the early days, it was in favour of awarding scholarships to students who scored well in exams.

Nowadays, the use of psychological interviews has enabled the PSC to better determine other abilities in candidates.

These include leadership and communication skills.

Mr Teo said: "In the early days, the tilt was in favour of awarding scholarships to students who scored well in their exams. Nowadays, the use of psychological interviews and psychometric tests has enabled the PSC to better determine other abilities in our candidates such as leadership, intellectual abilities, character, interpersonal skills, communication skills and stress tolerance.

"Despite these tools, interviewing remains an art, with PSC members having to form a judgement on the holistic qualities of a candidate, foremost of which are integrity and a genuine commitment to serve Singapore and Singaporeans."

Unlike what some parents may think, Mr Teo added the PSC does not look at a student's PSLE or O-Level scores.

Observers said the emphasis on diversity is also critical as Singapore tries to give equal opportunities to those less well-off.

Singapore Management University's Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan said: "One, It recognises the changing realities and that the public service cannot lag behind those changing reality. Two... that it recognises that as income gap widens, it becomes more important to ensure that the scholarship system, the public service does not become elitist. And I think thirdly, there is also the whole intent behind trying to ensure that the public service reflects the education landscape, that it's more receptive to different peaks of excellence, so it's not just about being exam smart."

Risk Consultant Devadas Krishnadas said government scholarships should be engines of social mobility and it should be awarded on a mix of merit and need, not just different kinds of merit.

He explained: "This way, the children from middle and lower income households who cannot afford the 'arms race' of education to ensure extreme academic scores but who still do very well, can have chances to access the best education which their families could not otherwise afford."

This is the second open letter issued by Mr Teo since he became the PSC chairman.

The first, in 2009, was about the PSC interview process and it was really to give scholarship applicants a better understanding of the kind of candidates that the PSC was looking for.



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This time, Mr Teo said the message was for a broader audience.

[Click here](#) for Mr Eddie Teo's open letter.

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