

# What does Singapore need from its next generation?

Being exam-smart is not enough. One should be able to think from first principles, venture out of one's comfort zone and join dots across different domains.

## Lily Kong

For Singapore to continue to thrive, we need a significant shift in the way our younger generation think and act. And we need to support them in making that shift.

What should we be looking for in our youth? We need independence of thought, dexterity in connecting ideas, growth and innovation orientation, and we need a more human, more interpersonal, more networked and more culturally literate generation than ever before. Here's why.

In today's fluid and increasingly fragmented global climate, Singapore stands at a critical juncture. Its strategic position in the region and beyond needs to be consolidated, or others will eat our lunch.

Singapore must remain relevant as a financial and economic hub but also accentuate its role as the vanguard for knowledge creation and innovation. The same previously successful industries, the same diligent workforce, and the same business models will just not be good enough.

Meanwhile, a generational change has set in. The tools of an older generation to enable a better life for their offspring have created a younger generation that has only known stable, comfortable lives.

At the Public Service Commission (PSC), of which I am a member, I read many essays from scholarship applicants. I have been struck by how events that are reported to have changed lives in Singapore often revolve around episodes like the disappointment of not being elected to leadership roles in student clubs, or handling disagreements among friends.

In contrast, applicants from other parts of South-east Asia share far more dire events in their lives: eviction from homes, parental suicides, forced migration, and the consequent upheavals that shaped them.

It's nobody's fault that Singapore has created comfortable lives for the younger generation, and it is a good thing in many ways that our younger Singaporeans do not have to confront the challenges that abound elsewhere. But the good life has other consequences. Path-dependent behaviours have crept in. Hunger, drive and curiosity could be sharpened. Mental resilience is eroding. A superiority complex is sometimes evident.

At the PSC, it is obvious that many of our applicants are most comfortable choosing universities where their seniors have gone before. It is refreshing when one

encounters an applicant with independent thought who argues from first principles how his or her choice of university is premised, rather than what rankings promote.

Path-dependent ways of thinking make for status quo behaviours – whether it is in policymaking, business decisions, or other arenas. And there is more evidence of path-dependency behaviours than may be good for us.

Some years ago, at my previous institution, it was so often the case that those who most enthusiastically took up the opportunities for global exposure activities and those who were most active in asking questions at public lectures by notable global and local leaders were non-Singaporean students. Then, colleagues often commented on how these international students were much more hungry and curious.

At my current institution, this is not the case perhaps because we have made global exposure a graduation requirement and the competition is in securing the choice opportunity. Perhaps it is also because we have strongly inculcated a participatory approach to dialogue and debate. My larger point is that we can easily allow a younger generation to slide into comfortable backseats, or we can intentionally foster a greater sense of curiosity and hunger for opportunities.

Then, there is the question of resilience. Sure, Covid-19 brought mental health issues to the forefront. But studies have also shown that mental health issues are more prevalent in richer, more developed countries. Singapore has declared mental health a high-priority issue to address, warranting a National Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. It is a complex challenge, but we should aim to nurture stronger, more resilient people, patterned after our pioneering generations.

And what of the sense of superiority? When I wrote in The Straits Times previously about getting our youth to know South-east Asia and to correct the misguided sense of superiority towards the region, I received an outpouring of support. But there were also one or two polite voices of protest from youth who pointed to how they have been acknowledged for their humility, diligence and willingness to learn from the region. Assuming there is sufficient self-awareness, this is encouraging, but given the huge tilt in support of my analysis, we have a long way to go.

Our next generation of Singaporeans need to be robust and resilient, hungry and curious. They should be able to harness but not be defined by technology



Educational institutions must mount a proactive response to nurture in young people qualities beyond academic knowledge and technical know-how, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

alone. They must accentuate their humanity in a technological age by cultivating a deep sensitivity, manifest in interpersonal empathy and cross-cultural understanding. They need to participate with depth and breadth in diverse networks, and harness them for good. Critically, they should foster a growth and innovation mindset.

### THINKING FROM FIRST PRINCIPLES

In an exam-smart society where perfect scores are aplenty, one might think intellectual and cognitive abilities are the least of our challenges. Yet, there is obviously so much more to intellect than success in exams.

In the midst of the information explosion with the digital age, we need our young people to be able to cut through the noise and get to the nub of issues. They need to have the ability to navigate the breadth of issues that confront society and institutions with dexterity, to dive deeper where that is called for, but to avoid being entrenched in siloed thinking. We need them to be able to assess from first principles and not rely only on path-dependent ways of thinking and doing.

We need to help our next

generation build the ability to break down complex challenges into their most basic and foundational elements and draw on diverse disciplinary insights to address those challenges.

I see the current rush to enrol in computer science courses as another form of path-dependent behaviour. To be sure, this course of study has many merits in a technological age, but it also has its limitations. Technologies will undoubtedly be part of the solution the world needs, but technologies alone, without an understanding of individual psychologies, societal values, political relations, legal and policy frameworks, regulatory regimes and workable business models will not suffice. Singapore will be well served by those with the deep technical expertise, but also those with more breadth and interdisciplinary dexterity.

### HUMANITY IN AN AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

In a world dominated by social media, where the young (and not so young) live in virtual worlds, the ability to connect with other human beings in meaningful ways unfortunately seems to be receding. All too often, we see families sitting together at dining tables, each fiddling with their

mobile devices. Even while generative AI is able to undertake many routine tasks, for the workforce to remain competitive, more value must be accorded to the distinctly human skills of effective interpersonal engagement and cross-cultural empathy.

Educational institutions must mount a proactive response to nurture in young people qualities beyond academic knowledge and technical know-how. Employers need to look beyond domain knowledge which, while important, will quickly become obsolete as the shelf life of knowledge shrinks rapidly. Through experiential learning initiatives and international exchange programmes, schools and universities stand a chance of honing students' cross-cultural competencies and developing qualities of intuitive understanding, open-mindedness, respect and empathy for different perspectives.

At a recent discussion with my colleagues at the Centre for Global Education Opportunities (CGEO) responsible for developing these opportunities, my exhortation was for us to adhere fully to the spirit of such activities and not just to the letter. That is to say, this should not just be a tick in the list of

things that students must do. Our efforts must be to truly support them in developing an understanding of other systems, other cultures, and other peoples, through first-hand interactions and experience. Only then will we have a chance of deepening humanity in an age of technology.

### GROWTH AND INNOVATION MINDSET

If human capital is all that we have in Singapore, then the stock of talent that our national fertility rate offers must be but a baseline. Augmenting it with talent from elsewhere enlarges our stock, but we must also cultivate in our younger generation a growth mindset. This is the belief that the brains and talent which one is endowed with at birth get you only to the starting point. One's abilities can and must grow through constant learning, embracing challenges, accepting mistakes as opportunities for improvement, seeking feedback, and recognising setbacks and failures as part of a growth process.

So too must we cultivate an innovation mindset: an appetite for new ideas, a courage to challenge the status quo, and a penchant for creative destruction. It is critical to also be able to seize opportunities, and to act courageously and decisively.

There is no better time than in one's formative years to build these mindsets. Seizing opportunities of overseas internships in untested settings, throwing oneself into entrepreneurial ecosystems where the lingua franca is unfamiliar and the business environment challenging, and striking out to far-flung places on one's own accord as opposed to staying in safe, environmental bubbles curated for one – these are the stuff of growth and innovation. But I hasten to acknowledge that at least venturing out safely in structured and managed groups is better than not venturing out at all.

### OPTIMISM FOR THE FUTURE

As Singapore moves forward, it must raise a new generation of leaders, professionals and entrepreneurs who can traverse diverse contexts with confidence, not least by tapping their extensive networks, navigating cross-cultural differences, building strong interpersonal relationships, and connecting the dots across different domains.

They must also embody the spirit of lifelong learning and continually seek to grow and innovate. The good news is that government, professional and business organisations, and educational institutions are variously working in concerted ways to produce the opportunities that Singaporeans can avail themselves of. Even as we create the myriad opportunities, my exhortation to my colleagues to be the guardian of a spirit, not the keeper of laundry lists, rings loudly in my head.

To be part of the proverbial village that raises the Singaporean child ready for the future, we need to be true to the mission at hand.

Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor. Her research has focused on urban transformations, and social and cultural change in Asia.