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- Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on Tuesday (July 2) urged youths in Singapore not to “compare with others” and follow their own talents when deciding which career paths to take
- He also stressed that the Government will provide more opportunities for Singaporeans to pursue their diverse aspirations and their own definitions of success
- Mr Wong was speaking at his first youth-specific engagement since he was sworn in as the nation’s premier on May 15 this year
- He added that everyone must do their part to “contribute to a better society” if Singapore is to move forward

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has urged youths to look within themselves and follow their talents in deciding their career paths, stressing that the Government will provide more opportunities for Singaporeans to pursue their diverse aspirations and their own definitions of success.

“We all have our own abilities and strengths — there is no need to compare with others, to squeeze into boxes we are not meant to fit.

“Instead, follow your talents and strive to reach your own full potential,” he said.

Mr Wong was giving a speech at a youth dialogue held in Singapore Management University (SMU) on Tuesday (July 2) evening.

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About 900 students from various Institutes of Higher Learning, polytechnics and the Institute of Technical Education were in attendance.

It was Mr Wong's first youth-specific engagement since he was sworn in as the nation's premier on May 15 this year.

While people in the past focused on a few key professions like doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers, Mr Wong said many more career pathways exist in today's world.

In the healthcare profession, for example, society is also increasingly recognising the experience and expertise of nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists — not just doctors.

As such, youths today should put in the effort to "cultivate and nurture your abilities and strengths", said Mr Wong, who is also Finance Minister.

However, Mr Wong reminded those in attendance that they "cannot possibly become an instant expert" at their chosen fields.

"Along the way you will very likely face some rejections and setbacks.

"But if you work hard to cultivate your own virtues and excel at what you do, you will see breakthroughs," he said, citing the story of Dr Katalin Kariko, a researcher who was a pioneer of messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) vaccines.

Dr Kariko had faced myriad challenges, Mr Wong said, including not having her research recognised, being demoted by her university and having her funding applications rejected.

However, he said: "Because of her dedication to her work, she ended up saving countless lives globally."

'WE MUST ALL DO OUR PART'

At the event jointly organised by SMU, the Institute of Policy Studies and Varsity Voices, a student-led inter-university political awareness group, Mr Wong said that everyone must do their part to "contribute to a better society" if Singapore is to move forward.

"We don't want a society where everyone is for themselves, where the fittest survives and the weak suffer what they must."

To that end, Mr Wong said that the Government has and will continue to create more opportunities for Singaporeans to contribute to society and shape its "character and tone".

For instance, the Singapore Government Partnerships Office was launched in January this year to make it easier for citizens to partner with the Government and identify opportunities for collaboration.

Four youth panels have also been set up to deliberate issues of concern to young people, such as financial security and sustainability, with those involved slated to present their recommendations at an inaugural Youth Policy Forum in August, he said.

Mr Wong ended his speech by saying that he is "confident" that Singapore's best days are ahead.

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He told the youths in attendance: "All of you are the authors of the next chapter of our Singapore Story."

YOUTHS' BURNING QUESTIONS

In the question-and-answer segment with Mr Wong following his speech moderated by SMU president Lily Kong, students lined up in waves to pose their questions to the Prime Minister. They encompassed a broad range of topics including housing concerns, social mobility and economic policies.

The segment kicked off with a question by Professor Kong on what skills young people should develop for the future. In response, Mr Wong said that youths should think about "mega trends" that will permeate global discourse over the coming years and ride on them.

These include digital technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and broader themes like the future of sustainability and finance.

"Even if that is not your cup of tea, you can embrace technology, you can familiarise yourself with AI tools... This will apply to you regardless of what job you want to be in," he said.

"Think of AI as your co-worker, as your friend, as AI is something that will enable you to be a better human being, and embrace that."

Mr Wong added that the "centre of gravity of the global economy will shift more and more towards Asia", and that a better understanding of the region will open up opportunities for them in the job market.

When asked by a student about inequality and his plans to ensure social mobility for Singaporeans, Mr Wong pointed out that the country's Gini coefficient, which is a statistical measure of economic inequality in a population, has been coming down — a sign that "we are becoming more equal" with regard to income.

Where social mobility is concerned, Mr Wong said that the Government is doing more to create opportunities for those in disadvantaged groups, including investments at the preschool level, to ensure social mobility in Singapore "remains alive and well".

KidSTART is one such initiative, he said. It is a non-profit organisation that started in 2016 to provide support for child development, coordinate and strengthen holistic services for families, and monitor the developmental progress of children from birth onwards.

One question that prompted applause from some sections of the auditorium was why Members of Parliament (MPs) are allowed to take on second jobs in addition to their MP duties, and whether it would result in any conflicts of interest.

Mr Wong described the decision to allow MPs to do so as a "pragmatic arrangement" — citing the fact that he has to perform the duties of a Prime Minister as well as that of an MP.

Similarly, he added: "We recognise that some people have other private sector commitments. We let them do it, but we fully expect them to discharge their MP duties as well.

"And if they fail to do so, there will be a consequence: Either as a party... we may not renew them, or voters will decide, and voters will know if their MP is working hard or not."

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Mr Wong also said that the Government is "very vigilant" about making sure no conflicts of interest ever happen in Singapore.

"Across the board, we want to make sure that we have a political system that is clean and has integrity. Once we lose that, once money politics seeps in, once vested interests seep in, we will be in deep trouble," he said.

"So, we will always be vigilant in making sure our system remains clean."