

Region's future lies in developing its people and talent, say panellists

Importance of talent mobility, collaboration and integration among issues discussed at education forum

Gabrielle Chan

While Singapore continues to prioritise the development of its people, it should also "have the best people" on its side to conquer challenges such as deglobalisation, said Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on March 11.

Describing Singapore as a multi-racial, multicultural and multi-religious nation, DPM Heng said the Republic is well positioned in South-east Asia to be a "powerful bridge" and "powerful connector" to the rest of the world.

But this also requires a focus on talent attraction and development, he added.

"If we can learn from the best from around the world, let us be very open to getting the best to Singapore," he said at The Straits Times Education Forum 2025.

Held in partnership with Singapore Management University (SMU), the forum focused on South-east Asia's shared future, with panellists discussing the importance of talent mobility, collaboration and integration.

DPM Heng, who was guest of honour at the event, sat on the panel with DBS chief executive and SMU chairman Piyush Gupta, Indonesian investor and entrepreneur Aldi Haryoprato, and online car marketplace Carro's CEO Aaron Tan.

The panel discussion was moderated by SMU's provost-designate, Professor Alan Chan. Nearly 600 people attended the event.

More than institutional arrangements, infrastructure and geolocation, the region has succeeded because of its people and the businesses, as well as a shared culture and history, Mr Gupta said.

Looking towards the future of South-east Asia, the focus should be on people and their talent.

"Our future is truly founded on what we can do about empowering our people, creating a large talent pool and continuing to create differentiation on the back of that," Mr Gupta said.

He said the region's strength lies in its young people, although enrolment in tertiary education is low across the region, meaning some lack the opportunity to pursue higher education and develop their ideas.

The key is building a more robust education system, from universities to post-education jobs, he said, adding that arrangements made within the region should be maxi-



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Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat (centre) at The Straits Times Education Forum 2025 on March 11 with (from left) SMU provost-designate Alan Chan, who moderated the panel discussion; Mr Aaron Tan, chief executive of online car marketplace Carro; DBS CEO and SMU chairman Piyush Gupta; and Indonesian investor and entrepreneur Aldi Haryoprato. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

COLLECTIVE STRENGTH

We respect the diversity in Asean, the culture, the history and what each country chooses to do, but at the same time harnessing our strength together.



DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
HENG SWEE KEAT

HUGE AREA OF OPPORTUNITY

Building talent, building education, building people-to-people exchange, building our own applied research is a huge area of opportunity for us, and we need to focus on that.



DBS CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND
SMU CHAIRMAN PIYUSH GUPTA

BUILDING A SHARED FUTURE

The best way to build a shared future is not only from shared stories, but shared friendships.



INDONESIAN INVESTOR
AND ENTREPRENEUR
ALDI HARYOPRATOMO

BRINGING OUT PEOPLE'S BEST

Every time we enter a new country, when we bring on board people, we always make it a point to understand how the people work best, locally, culturally, so that we can bring the best out of our people.



CARRO CHIEF EXECUTIVE
AARON TAN

mised through exchange programmes, for example.

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tion, building people-to-people exchange, building our own applied research is a huge area of opportu-

nity for us, and we need to focus on that," Mr Gupta said.

Sharing a business perspective,

Mr Tan said that when companies expand into different countries, it is key to understand how the local

people work, as well as their culture, in order to bring out the best in them.

He also said navigating labour laws and regulations, which vary by country, can be challenging.

When asked by Mr Gupta why he chose to expand his business into South-east Asia instead of countries such as Germany and the US, Mr Tan cited familiarity with Singapore and a deeper understanding of the region.

Mr Gupta said: "Labour laws are different, manpower laws are different, but the people-to-people connectivity gives us comfort around our region, and that is what we need to try to build up."

Mr Haryoprato, who shared his experiences in both the health-care and movie industries, gave the example of how collaboration across regions in movies can create stories about the region and help people learn more about South-east Asian culture.

He added that the best way to build a shared future is through shared friendships.

"I really advocate having more shared movies and shared stories, with more opportunities for programmes where we can build shared friendships because ultimately, it's the human-to-human connection that will connect our region together."

Responding to Mr Haryoprato, DPM Heng said movies will help viewers appreciate the various cultural nuances in South-east Asia and showcase how diversity can be a strength.

During a question-and-answer segment, the audience asked about topics ranging from geopolitics and economic development, to cultural preservation and talent management.

In response to a question on how the region can become a "proactive architect of global norms and governance", Mr Gupta stressed the need for the region to develop its own research and leadership capabilities.

He said: "A large part of the heavy lifting of thinking still comes from the Western world."

Universities and think-tanks in the region need to play a bigger role in developing stronger research, Mr Gupta said. "We have to lift our universities and get the education system to actually create thought leadership."

Addressing another question about mitigating the "brain drain" or intra-region talent movement, where skilled workers move from less developed to more developed countries, DPM Heng said: "The talents will go to where they feel is the best place to develop (themselves) to grow."

He added that Singapore has been doing much in the region in terms of hiring people, training them and helping them level up.

"Looking at the areas where we can make an impact is important," he said.

"It's not just about money, but how that money is used, where the needs are the greatest and how we can make our contribution."

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