

The obsession with staying on track is holding Singapore students back

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The mindset towards education as a set of neat milestones needs to change.

Kenneth Goh

I have taught many students, but when I think about what it means to prepare for the future, one student – let’s call him “J” – stands out.

J was an average student with unremarkable grades, yet on graduation, he was hired as regional head of a renowned e-commerce platform.

He stood out to me because of the unconventional path he took. Unlike most students fixated on getting straight As or “internship maxxing” – stacking up as many internships as possible to stand out to potential employers – J built a cosmetics e-commerce venture while still at university.

J was focused on growing his venture, and even took a leave of absence to work on it. He turned it into a seven-figure business before selling his shares to his partners before graduation.

While academics were important, he was not obsessed by them. He still had a keen mind, as evident from our many conversations, but unlike many of his peers, who view university as a means to build an impressive resume for their job applications, J took courses that were relevant to his business.

Our conversations were rarely about exams or grades, but about the real-world challenges he faced as a young entrepreneur: managing staff and customers, coordinating supply chains, marketing his business, building trust with partners and making decisions amid uncertainty.

While many of his peers were modelling themselves after seniors – replicating their internships, clubs and leadership roles – J was charting his own path, experimenting, learning and building something of his own rather than copying someone else’s playbook.

Contrasting J’s experience with that of the typical undergraduate reveals how deeply Singaporeans have internalised what I call the

linear progression fallacy – the belief that success follows a fixed sequence of milestones. To stand out, then, is to hit those milestones earlier and faster than everyone else, fuelling an arms race in grades, internships and co-curricular activities pursued more for a line on the resume than for genuine learning, curiosity or growth.

J’s story, by contrast, illustrates the value of taking the less conventional path. After graduation, he did more than just “turn out fine”. He thrived.

Outside of entrepreneurship, I come across many other examples of non-linear journeys among our national athletes.

With support from SportSG’s spexEducation initiative, bronze medallist at last year’s World Aquatics Swimming World Cup, Teong Tzen Wei, withdrew from university to pursue his sporting ambitions, with plans to resume his studies later.

One of my students, national shooter Ho Xiu Yi, took a gap year before enrolling at SMU, to train full-time in a bid for Olympic qualification. While she missed the cut, the experience proved transformative. She said it gave her the confidence to commit to ambitious goals without fearing failure. Today, she continues to compete while juggling her academics, shooting practice and internships.

These examples show that taking a less conventional route is becoming more viable, with different pathways within the system that make it possible for Singaporeans to pursue their goals.

Yet our collective fixation on linear progression persists, raising an important question: how has this mindset become so entrenched – and how can we begin to shift it?

THE SYSTEM NOW

As exam season draws to an end, it’s worth reflecting on how deeply our education system influences Singaporeans’



National swimmer Teong Tzen Wei during the 100-day countdown event for the World Aquatics Championships in April 2025. With support from SportSG’s spexEducation initiative, Teong, bronze medallist at last year’s World Aquatics Swimming World Cup, withdrew from university to pursue his sporting ambitions, with plans to resume his studies later. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM



A 2015 file photo of national shooter Ho Xiu Yi. She took a gap year before enrolling at SMU to train full-time in a bid for Olympic qualification. While she missed the cut, she said the experience proved transformative, giving her the confidence to commit to ambitious goals without fearing failure. ST FILE PHOTO

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perception of progress as it touches nearly every one of us – as students, parents, or educators – from a very early age.

Singapore has one of the best public education systems in the world. We have a well-structured system that provides a clear pathway for progression – PSLE at 12, N or O levels at 16, branching off to IB or A levels at 18 for some, a polytechnic diploma at 19 for others, followed by university, career and promotion.

Results at each stage determine which pathways and opportunities students have access to. But one effect is that it also reinforces the perception of progression as a fixed sequence of milestones, with a narrowing of the field at each stage.

This inadvertently conditions us

to view success as a linear progression, with little room to pause or veer away from this path.

Reforms in education – from revamping the PSLE scoring system to expanding university pathways – have sought to reduce the high stakes perceived in the system.

Yet parents’ anxiety and the booming tuition and enrichment industry show how deeply entrenched this perception of linear progression is.

WHY NON-LINEAR THINKING MATTERS NOW

In today’s era of rapid change, the old pathways to success may no longer hold.

Artificial intelligence, shifting geopolitics and global

restructuring mean that many jobs will disappear, while new ones may emerge in unexpected forms. In such a world, the skills that matter most are not about following a fixed script but about adapting, experimenting and creating new paths.

To keep pace, we must be comfortable with uncertainty – engaging in trial and error, learning from setbacks and pivoting when circumstances shift, while remaining purposeful about our direction.

Embracing non-linear thinking is not the same as “quiet-quitting” in the West, or the “lying flat” movement in China. In fact, it is the opposite.

Checking out is often a reaction to the rigidity and relentless

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Learning to value initiative and experimentation

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pressure of staying “on track”.

The non-linear progression counters this by legitimising veering off, experimenting and finding alternative routes towards milestones that are personally meaningful rather than conventionally defined.

EMBRACING DIFFERENT PATHWAYS

How can we shift mindsets from linear to non-linear progression through the education system?

This is not about overhauling – the structure provides stability and accountability. But we can recalibrate the balance and

emphasis to give more space for individualised exploration and growth.

Two areas deserve particular attention: the timing of milestones and what we reward.

For every Singapore student, there is no escaping the PSLE. While it no longer functions as a formal streaming exam, it continues to play a decisive role in determining which secondary school a child is posted to.

Recent public debates have focused on the scoring system and reporting, but less attention has been paid to the timing of the exam.

Should a high-stakes national exam take place at 12, when

children are still developing at very different rates? Would it make more sense to hold it later, at 14, when adolescents are developmentally more aligned?

Delaying it would ease the pressure of racing to meet early milestones and give our young more room to explore, stumble and recover – helping to shift mindsets about progression from a fixed track to a non-linear journey that values growth through self-directed pace and pathways.

Timing, however, is only part of the equation. Equally important is what we reward.

Educators can legitimise non-linear pathways by recognising students who take

initiative, experiment and persist through setbacks – not only those with good grades.

My research on team learning reinforces this: teams that invested in learning before chasing results lagged initially, but ultimately outperformed others. Likewise, education systems that make room for exploration may sacrifice short-term outcomes, but they build the deeper capabilities – problem-solving, resilience and creativity – that sustain breakthroughs.

While schools have awards for non-academic attributes, such as character and improvement, these often feel symbolic rather than consequential.

We can do more to recognise and celebrate those who have stepped off the expected path to create something new – whether organising a neighbourhood arts or sports initiative, developing a tech solution to address a community need or turning a personal passion into a creative venture.

When education begins to value such initiative and experimentation, it sends a powerful signal across society – that success is not about staying “on track”, but about finding the courage to create new ones. This is the mindset shift we need to make the move from line to loop.

The goal is not to discard structure, but to create space

within it for flexibility and discovery – allowing non-linear pathways to be valued as much as conventional ones.

Ultimately, the question is not how well Singaporeans can meet every milestone on time, but whether we can nurture a generation that values reflection, exploration and has the courage to adapt when the path ahead changes.

Our ability to find new routes will determine how we thrive in a new world.

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