

# MOE sets aside \$556m over next five years for research in social sciences and humanities

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The Straits Times, Prime, Page 2, Section: THE BIG STORY

Friday 27 February 2026

987 words, 583cm<sup>2</sup> in size

386,100 circulation



Education Minister Desmond Lee speaking at the launch of the 2026 Social Science and Humanities Ideas Festival at SMU on Feb 26. The festival will feature more than 100 researchers sharing insights on themes such as mental well-being and adaptation to emerging technologies. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

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Social sciences and humanities will receive a boost in support, with the Ministry of Education (MOE) setting aside \$556 million over the next five years for research in those fields.

This is an increase of around 20 per cent from the \$457 million set aside in the last five years to support key initiatives launched by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC).

The SSRC was set up in 2016 to provide direction for social science and humanities research as Singapore matures as a nation, such as in the areas of ageing and social mobility.

Announcing the increase in spending on Feb 26, Education Minister Desmond Lee said: "We live in times of great complexity and uncertainty, and amidst these changes, social science and humanities research can help us to make sense of what's going on, chart our course, identify trends, avoid pitfalls, and seize opportunities."

For example, he said, such research can inform efforts to build resilience to climate change, mitigate risks and harness opportunities arising from artificial intelligence for jobs and society, support an ageing population, and strengthen trust between communities in a turbulent world.

Mr Lee was speaking at the launch of the 2026 Social Science and Humanities Ideas Festival, held at Singapore Management University (SMU).

The festival, which runs from Feb 26 to March 27, will feature more than 100 researchers sharing insights on themes such as mental well-being and adaptation to emerging technologies.

In addition to producing strong scholarship, the Government wants to support applied research that can achieve real-world impact and help overcome Singapore's challenges, Mr Lee said.

"To do so, we must grow our own pool of world-class researchers who understand Singapore's unique context and can harness research to make a difference."

Singapore's social science and humanities research can also help to address global challenges, he added.

Mr Lee said the \$457 million set aside for such research from 2021 to 2025 has supported close to 80 research projects in areas such as behavioural science, medical humanities, and sustainability, and trained many local researchers, including around 200 PhD students.

He said work in the social science and humanities has contributed to efforts to improve lives in Singapore.

For example, National University of Singapore social work professor Irene Ng's research on the lived realities of in-work poverty among young platform workers informed enhanced protection for platform workers, through the Platform Workers Act passed in September 2024.

Meanwhile, SMU's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing, led by sociology professor Paulin Straughan, works with government agencies to use research insights to advance the holistic well-being of older people in Singapore.

"So I would encourage my colleagues from government agencies as well as our researchers to

actively seek out and deepen such collaborations to address Singapore's challenges and to make a contribution to global efforts," said Mr Lee.

Since SSRC was founded in 2016, it has awarded funding to 54 research projects under the Social Science Research Thematic Grant, 21 early-career researchers, and 48 Graduate Research Fellowship projects.

The research projects span topics such as evolving geopolitics in a changing world order, public housing and insights on ageing in Singapore.

Mr Lee said the new tranche of funding will further strengthen the core of Singaporean researchers through initiatives such as the Graduate Research Fellowship.

Launched in 2021, the fellowship aims to encourage early-career Singaporean researchers based overseas for their PhD or postdoctoral training to return and take up appointments in local educational institutions.

"In this new tranche, we are looking to invest more in such initiatives to further expand our talent pipeline for outstanding Singaporean researchers," said Mr Lee.

The 2026 Ideas Festival, supported by the SSRC and jointly organised by the autonomous universities, the University of the Arts Singapore and research institutions, draws upon the work of local social science and humanities researchers to look at critical issues facing Singapore and the world.

Professor Khong Yuen Foong and Professor Joseph Liow from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy were awarded the 2019 Social Science Research Thematic Grant for their project on the strategic alignments of the 10 ASEAN countries amid the US-China geopolitical rivalry.

Prof Khong said the central finding of the project, completed in June 2025, was that alignments are moving away from the US and in China's favour.

"Our finding suggests that... it has not been possible for ASEAN to 'hang together' - some are more closely aligned with China, a few are still hedging successfully, and one is closer to the US," he added.

Prof Khong said Singapore, together with Malaysia and Vietnam, has managed to stay in the hedging zone, "suggesting that it is calibrating its relations with the two great powers adroitly."

One recipient of the 2023 SSRC Graduate Research Fellowship was Mr Kok Bing Cai, now a third-year PhD student with the department of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Mr Kok, 32, said he wants to encourage the use of statistics and quantitative methods to access the "treasure trove" of data generated by researchers in Singapore, to better understand human behaviour.

This will help inform clinical practice in psychotherapy, for instance, as well as health and social policies here in areas like ageing, he said.

"What I hope to do is to change how we view psychology and how we can perhaps improve mental health within Singapore," said Mr Kok, who hopes to finish his PhD in 2028 and return to Singapore, where he will be based at Nanyang Technological University.

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