

Beyond metrics: Is Singapore's fixation with measuring everything holding it back?

By Holly Yang

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By turning life into a scorecard, we may be losing the incentive to come up with innovations whose impact cannot yet be measured.

Holly Yang

Singaporeans have long excelled at answering questions that can be measured easily. What was one's PSLE score? What was the ranking of one's university? What is one's housing status or starting salary? Increasingly, the scorecard has followed us into every corner of life.

But as Singapore debates why it has struggled to nurture a company like Samsung or TSMC, perhaps we should also ask a more uncomfortable question: What happens when a society becomes exceptionally good at measuring people relative to one another?

Many foreigners who first move to Singapore quickly find

themselves in conversations with someone asking them, "Do you have a work permit or an employment pass?" And if you've been here for a few years, the question becomes, "Do you have PR or are you Singaporean?" I was taken aback by such personal questions when I moved here in 2013 but over time realised it's how people are categorised.

A few years down the road, I was looking for a piano teacher for my six-year-old daughter – someone who could nurture her interest in and love for music.

When I asked for recommendations in a WhatsApp group chat, my neighbour very proudly privately messaged me a recording of his daughter's performance and shared that her piano teacher had allowed her to reach a certain grade level within a short time span. While I was impressed with her technical skills, it wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

The interaction stayed with me because it reflected something broader about Singaporean

society. We are remarkably good at translating human progress into legible milestones: grades, rankings, certifications, schools, housing tiers, immigration status, performance metrics. The political scientist James C. Scott, in his landmark book *Seeing Like A State*, argued that modern states have a deep tendency to make complex social realities "legible" – to simplify and standardise them so they can be measured, managed, and compared. Singapore has perhaps mastered this art more thoroughly than almost any other society. Even casual conversations often become exercises in locating one another on some invisible scoreboard.

STRENGTH CAN CREATE BLIND SPOTS

To be clear, this culture did not emerge by accident. Measurement, benchmarking, and meritocracy helped transform Singapore from a vulnerable island into one of the world's most

efficient and successful economies. The instinct to compare performance and reward achievement created extraordinary discipline and accountability.

But every strength, when pushed far enough, eventually creates its own blind spots.

The recent Straits Times

The danger is not simply stress or burnout, although those are real concerns. The deeper problem is that over-reliance on measurable proxies can crowd out qualities that are essential but harder to quantify: curiosity, originality, resilience, empathy, creativity, and intrinsic motivation.

commentary asking why Singapore has not produced its own Samsung or TSMC frames the issue largely as an economic or structural one. But perhaps the challenge is also cultural. Samsung and TSMC did not emerge from systems optimised solely around minimising risk and maximising measurable short-term outcomes. Truly transformative companies often come from environments willing to tolerate ambiguity, experimentation, unconventional personalities, and long periods where success cannot yet be measured clearly.

In other words, innovation requires space for people to become something before society knows how to score it.

In my own experience teaching at Singapore Management University, I have also come to appreciate why grading rubrics matter. In many accounting modules, there are objectively correct answers: balance sheets must balance, and an incorrect

Many of the most important challenges humanity faces – climate change, inequality, demographic ageing, artificial intelligence – do not come with answer keys. Society needs a generation capable of sitting with uncertainty long enough to imagine solutions that do not yet exist, says the writer.
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Skilled at optimisation but uncomfortable with uncertainty, failure

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interest rate calculation could cost a company millions of dollars. Precision matters, and fairness requires clear standards.

But the dynamic changes in courses that are more conceptual – courses centred on broader societal questions, philosophical debates, or critical reasoning. In these settings, students often become deeply uncomfortable when confronted with questions that do not have a single correct answer, or problems for which no existing solution currently exists. Increasingly, I find that many students are not struggling with intelligence or effort, but with uncertainty itself. They have spent years operating within systems where success depended on identifying the correct metric,

optimising against it, and minimising ambiguity.

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

And yet the future they are inheriting will require exactly the opposite. Many of the most important challenges humanity faces – climate change, inequality, demographic ageing, artificial intelligence – do not come with answer keys. Society needs a generation capable of sitting with uncertainty long enough to imagine solutions that do not yet exist. I do not fault students for finding this difficult. If anything, I increasingly sympathise with those who admit they no longer have the mental capacity to constantly operate under systems of measurement, comparison, and optimisation.

I see the same tension in my own research on workplace well-being. Most studies on relative performance evaluation focus on senior executives, but my co-authors and I study ordinary employees working in local start-ups. Using internal company data, survey responses, and data from a mindfulness app provided to employees, we find that workers facing more difficult performance targets relative to their peers exhibit greater signs of stress and anxiety. While comparing employees against one another can motivate performance, it also creates hidden psychological costs, especially for individuals already struggling with lower well-being.

The implications extend far beyond university life and the workplace. Increasingly,

Singaporean life itself feels organised around relative comparison. Children are streamed against peers at an early age. Parents compare schools and enrichment activities. Adults compare condominium districts, career trajectories, and immigration statuses. Even hobbies become competitive signalling mechanisms.

When every activity becomes measurable, people naturally begin optimising for what is visible rather than what is meaningful.

The danger is not simply stress or burnout, although those are real concerns. The deeper problem is that over-reliance on measurable proxies can crowd out qualities that are essential but harder to quantify: curiosity, originality, resilience, empathy,

creativity, and intrinsic motivation.

A child may advance rapidly through piano grades yet never develop a genuine love for music. An employee may hit every key performance indicator while quietly losing the psychological safety needed for creativity and risk-taking. A university may optimise for rankings and measurable “impact” while neglecting the slower, messier work of shaping ideas, communities, and long-term societal trust.

Singapore’s success story was built on discipline, measurement, and meritocracy. Those achievements deserve admiration, not dismissal. But a society that becomes too reliant on comparison risks teaching people that only measurable things

matter.

And when that happens, we may end up producing generations exceptionally skilled at optimisation, yet increasingly uncomfortable with uncertainty, failure, and originality.

Perhaps the question is not simply why Singapore has not produced its own Samsung or TSMC.

Perhaps the deeper question is whether we have created enough room for people to become something that cannot yet be measured.

• Holly Yang is a professor at the School of Accountancy, Singapore Management University. Her research focuses on the role of information and disclosure in shaping organisational and societal outcomes.