

Aptitude-based admissions and the road to a meritocracy of life

To realise a society where everyone advances through skills mastery, S'poreans must always have opportunities to earn second chances in life.



Ng Chia Wee

On the afternoon of March 4, 2016, my dream of going to university was hanging by a thread.

I stared at the list of letters on my A-level results slip, a list on which my immediate future rested. While I had done well for General Paper and history, my disappointing results for three other subjects called into question the possibility of entering university.

As I registered my dismay and frustration, I heard the sounds of metaphorical doors closing in my face, even as my peers received the keys to open theirs.

But not all hope was lost; the thread by which my dream was hanging had a name – discretionary admission (DA).

DA was the subject of recent research by Dr Kelvin Seah, Associate Professor Jessica Pan and Mr Rais Kamais. In March, they wrote about their findings for *The Straits Times*.

The DA scheme was technically a form of aptitude-based admission, where applicants are admitted to an institute of higher learning based on a holistic range of factors beyond grades alone.

Specifically, the DA scheme allowed local universities to admit up to 15 per cent of their student intake based on applicants' exceptional traits or achievements, even if they had missed the academic cut-off point for their desired course.

Since last year, the DA has been discontinued as a standalone scheme; the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University will instead practise aptitude-based admission far more extensively, similar to the existing practices of other institutes of higher learning.

The research findings, however, have only become more relevant given the normalisation of aptitude-based admission.

Analysing the data of recent NUS graduates, the researchers found that DA students were more likely to graduate with an honours degree as compared with the bottom 10th percentile of regular admission students. Furthermore, DA students outperformed the latter group in the labour market six months after graduation.

These findings highlight an undeniable reality: A person's future performance cannot be predicted from grades alone.

The authors of the research concluded: "Had academic performance been the sole yardstick for admission, they may well have been denied the opportunity to study in their university of choice."

As someone admitted through the DA scheme, I am reminded by the findings that I am in NUS because it let me demonstrate my aptitude holistically and the admission interviewers judged that my academic setback need not determine my future.

Aptitude-based admission gave

me the opportunity to prove them right.

A MERITOCRACY OF LIFE

I bring up this topic as I believe the idea of aptitude-based admission shows what Singapore's goal of a "meritocracy of life" could look like. This was a phrase used by Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in June last year. In a meritocracy of life, individuals "advance through the skills and mastery they acquire rather than grades earned long ago in school".

Around the world, education policies are sometimes criticised for not keeping up with societal norms. However, in Singapore, aptitude-based admission might reveal just where society is lagging behind in realising a meritocracy of life.

This lag can be revealed through two principles which underpin aptitude-based admission.

The first (and obvious) principle is that aptitude-based admission allows applicants to make their case based on a wide range of skills beyond academics, without filtering them out at the outset.

For some employers, however, academic grades may still serve as a significant filter. In 2018, then Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said in Parliament that "employers' hiring and human resource practices have to wake up" to a new mindset of valuing a broader range of strengths, and commended employers who have.

However, I believe there is something more fundamental at play which will influence how far mindsets can change. This can be revealed by a second and less obvious principle which underpins aptitude-based admission: a willingness to give applicants a second chance at success.

SECOND CHANCES

In my opinion, Singaporeans do believe in the idea of second chances. In fact, individuals who surmounted the challenges of securing one are often applauded. But consider this – why was it such a challenge in the first place? And how willing would we have been to take a chance on those individuals at their point of need, rather than when they are already successful?

At the point where ideas turn

into reality, there might be some roadblocks. An aptitude-based admission analogy could explain why. In his speech during the debate on ministries' budgets in 2016, Mr Ong, then Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills), asked: "Between a 12-pointer who is not interested in a course, and a 16-pointer who is very interested, who would you choose?" (A lower numerical score in the O/N-level scoring system denotes better performance.)

He was not talking about second chances, but one could easily see this as a scenario where the 16-pointer was someone who did not do as well on his first chance as the 12-pointer did. As Mr Ong said, the scenario above requires "making a judgment call".

Aptitude-based admission provides institutes of higher learning with the context to make that judgment call. But in the context of hiring, there may not be space for such calls. Some employers may err on the side of efficiency and conservatism, and simply pick the "safe option".

The tension facing employers is understandable – but it is also problematic. After all, if we reward only those who did well on their first chance by conventional indicators, and they receive further opportunities just because of that, then the odds will always be stacked against those who did not do well on their first chance and the goal of a meritocracy of life will never be reached.

To reach that goal, the tensions and mental roadblocks which

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hinder opportunities for second chances must be confronted.

CLEARING MENTAL ROADBLOCKS

To be sure, policy roadblocks must be cleared too. As then Deputy Prime Minister Tharman noted in 2015, the Government has to "intervene to promote second chances well beyond the school years". But what mental roadblocks can be cleared on society's part? I will suggest three.

First, as in the case of aptitude-based admission, recognise that those seeking a second chance just want an opportunity to make their case based on their aptitudes.

Second, understand that providing opportunity does not have to be at odds with efficiency. Practices such as having more candidates go through job-specific aptitude assessments or artificial intelligence interviews are easily scalable with technology. Aptitude-based hiring could even enhance organisational efficiency with a more diverse pool of staff.

Third, it is really in our self-interest to take action. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that no one is safe from career setbacks; it may be us or our children who would need that second chance some day. Surely it would be better to institutionalise an aptitude-based society now, one where we are comfortable with giving second chances.

Whether or not an aptitude-based society of second chances is realised depends on how committed we are to a meritocracy of life, and how far we understand that it is in all our interest to build it.

For all the roadblocks that may stand in the way, I believe that such a society remains within reach – if only we are willing to give it a chance or two.

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• We welcome contributions to the Sunday Views column. Write to us at stopinion@sph.com.sg