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DPM Lawrence Wong talks life priorities with young S'poreans

A conference in support of Forward Singapore sheds light on what youth want



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Must Singaporeans always be competitive and excel in what they do? Or can they be happy with just “good enough”?

This was one of the questions on life priorities and values posed during the Young Singaporeans Conference 2022, held two weeks ago by the Institute of Policy Studies.

I attended the two-day conference as an observer, as will my colleagues across various dialogues held over the next few months as part of the Forward Singapore exercise to forge a new social compact.

At this point, reporting on Forward Singapore is like feeling different parts of an elephant. The whole creature will emerge only in the form of a report mid-next year.

But the individual parts give a sense of what different industries and citizens are thinking about. In my case, they were young Singaporeans aged 18 to 30.

The subject of whether it is okay to be “good enough” is timely given the recent fuss over “quiet quitting”, or the idea that one should just meet one’s job description and not go above and beyond at work.

Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, who helmed the dialogue together with Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Health Janil Puthuchery, had this to say on the subject: Doing the bare minimum may seem appealing at first, but it does not lead to fulfilment in the long run.

It could be a sign that the individual has not found his calling and purpose, he said. “And therefore you’re like, ‘Well, why



Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, who helmed the dialogue together with Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Health Janil Puthuchery (left), speaking to participants at the Young Singaporeans Conference 2022 earlier this month. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

work so hard for this?’ Now, that I can understand. But if you have all that purpose...what do you want to make of your life here?”

Competitiveness does not have to be a rat race if one finds meaning in continual learning and pursuing excellence, he said.

The problem is that society’s mindset of success tends to be narrow, with parents funnelling their children into a small set of “preferred” professions and the “right” schools. Part of refreshing the concept of meritocracy is so that people are valued for who they are, and can enjoy good careers in whatever field they are in.

There were some similarities between this and Mr Wong’s speech at the Honour International Symposium on Sept 16, where he cautioned against complacency, inertia and entitlement.

“It is unfortunate but that is the reality. It is human nature to look

for the easy way out,” he said at the symposium.

“It applies even more so when we are in an environment of affluence and stability. That’s why across almost all cultures, there are variants of the saying that wealth does not last (beyond) three generations.”

There were light moments at the Young Singaporeans Conference. One of the young participants exclaimed when he saw Mr Wong: “I’m a big fan of your TikTok!”

The teams exchanged views with experts in their breakout groups. Their final presentations were short, sharp and peppered with diagrams. Here are just a few of their proposals.

DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVITY AND WELL-BEING

Participants said there should be a systematic attempt to address

barriers that prevent young people from getting help for their mental health. These include the stigma of seeing a counsellor, and fears that their mental health records will not be kept confidential.

Experts who joined the discussions felt that it is important to boost youth mental health literacy, make it part of the school curriculum, and create a safe space in schools and workplaces.

While online chats may be adequate for first-time encounters, there is a need to improve the “stickiness” of the experience and offer a real-life counsellor at the other end. Ultimately the quality of help given matters, whether online or in-person.

Some participants observed that young people are going beyond conventional therapy settings, and seeking other forms of community and support through TikTok as well as music and arts groups.

To help women advance in the workplace, they said organisations should improve board diversity, do away with gender-biased advertising, and support men to take on more childcare responsibilities, such as by having more diaper-changing stations in men’s restrooms.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ONLINE SPACE

Young people said they use social media for information, connection and validation. Efforts should be aimed not at helping them to disconnect from social media entirely, but to connect with more people offline and find the right balance.

Experts agreed, noting that combating online harms requires keeping an eye on what’s happening in the offline world too, as bad actors also exist there.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY

One quirky suggestion to boost Singapore’s food resilience was to replace flowering bushes such as bougainvillea, with “edible landscapes” of food plants such as cassava along roadsides and in housing estates.

To reduce food waste, some suggested setting up an aggregated online platform so that people know where to find unconsumed food.

Reduced-to-clear food products could also have more prominent placement in supermarkets.

Others suggested a tiered electricity bill where higher-income families pay more. And as sustainably sourced produce tends to be pricier, the Government can offer grants to make sustainable lifestyles more affordable.

As you can tell, some ideas are workable and others, not so much.

While some young people asked questions on “hard” topics such as the goods and services tax hike and healthcare financing, many were concerned about work-life harmony and inclusiveness, underscoring differences in attitudes on these issues between older and younger Singaporeans.

Underpinning these concerns, noted Dr Puthuchery, was a strong sense of justice which had to be tempered with a dose of reality.

Mr Wong said that there are costs and consequences to each proposal. Some issues may have to be set aside and re-examined later.

Other ideas will attract strong reactions from different stakeholders, he said: “Companies may decide ‘this is too much and I don’t want to stay here’, or community groups may feel ‘this is too much change and we don’t think we can accept such a major move.’”

The Singapore way, he added, is a partnership where all parties look for common ground and work to improve things – year by year, generation by generation.

Perhaps not everyone agreed with Mr Wong and Dr Puthuchery. Amid a hustle culture that demands long working hours, some may still wish to opt out of the rat race and be “good enough”, as a way to preserve their mental and physical well-being.

But the young participants displayed a level of comfort with difference and ambiguity, as well as the prospect that they might not arrive at any resolution by the end of the conference.

They also brought with them an energy and a sense of possibility. They made the effort to know more about the issues discussed, about one another, and by extension, their country. Big or small, that is always a good step forward.

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