Universities in the age of meritocracy 20

Traditional measures of merit have served their purpose. Enabling everyone to flourish – even as artificial intelligence threatens to outshine us all – requires that we diversify those yardsticks while also being clear that they should not define a person’s worth.

Simon Chesterman

It’s admissions season for universities and, as usual, we are seeking to admit the best students into our programmes. What does “best” mean? A first-class degree should not be given more weight to breeding and gender than brains. In recent decades, the focus shifted to measurable qualities like IQ and standardized tests, such as A-levels and the National University of Singapore’s AEIS.

Today, there is growing realisation that more diverse factors should be considered. That includes controlling for the impact that wealth and accumulated academic and cultural capital, as well as shifting the focus from past achievement to future potential.

In the process, we are redefining “merit”. This affects not just who gets to attend university but also the significance those opportunities have for one’s role in society.

THE FALL AND RISE OF MERITOCRACY

Given the importance of meritocracy to Singapore’s success – a search of SARS reveals that it has been mentioned in 228 separate sessions of Parliament – many are surprised to learn that the term was originally meant as a joke. Merit was coined by British politician Michael Young coined it in his 1958 dystopian satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. The book was framed as an academic treatise on the future of society, but it was actually a scathing attack on a society that replaced aristocracy with meritocracy – only to find hereditary class was restored successfully by similarly rigid categories of merit.

In theory, allowing opportunities for advancement based on talent rather than birth is fairer and more efficient. It is fairer for individuals, whose prospects are not limited by their parentage. For society, it broadens the pool of human capital on which it can draw.

In practice, however, those who attain positions of privilege will try to ensure their children do similarly well. Young predicted that this would limit social mobility, and those who did poorly would work harder to pull their children up behind them. In his 2020 book *The Tyranny Of Merit*, Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel attributes many of America’s present social and political foibles to his inescapable logic of unbridled language models have prompted the first serious call for a metaphorical AI research.

What does seem clear is that, however we define the term, and for better or worse, meritocracy is here to stay.

SANDERSON SAYS

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LIFE Imitates Art

Young later expressed remorse and regret that his work was taken literally. In a new edition published three decades after it had become a bestseller, he noted that the fate of many influential books is that people do not actually read them.

For his part, Sandel acknowledges the irony of critiquing meritocracy from Harvard – one of the very institutions that people do not actually read.

Alarming opportunities based on merit does not reduce inequality; rather, it aligns inequality with ability.

The result is a presumption that people get what they deserve. For the rich, this is self-sufficient and encourages the view that they are entitled to their privilege, earned by innate qualities (IQ – effort = merit).

For those left behind, it implies that their lot in life is indeed their own fault – that, if they had only been smarter or worked harder, things might have been different.

Young predicted in his novel that this combination of hubris and resentment would give rise to a backlash against meritocracy, a revolt postulated for 2034.

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MERIT VERSUS VALUE

In his 2020 book *Narrative Lessons*, Monetary Authority of Singapore managing director Ravi Menon also argued for recognising many forms of merit. He went on to stress that the economy must not forget how much help they had received on the way, how much fortune has helped in their life’s journey, as well as how we can contribute merit with value.

A BROADER DEFINITION OF MERIT

Speaking in March, Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing endorsed the need for a broader understanding of merit beyond grades – “a meritocracy of skills” that recognises diverse forms of talent, as well as the fact that talents may emerge at different stages of life.

Universities are moving in this direction, with greater emphasis on aptitude-based admissions and more entry points for lifelong learning.

At NUS College, where we are currently admitting our second cohort of students, one of the first points our leadership team agreed on was that we want bright students – but not necessarily the “brightest” in a narrow academic sense. We want students who are passionate about learning because they are curious, because they are willing to take risks – their interest in university should go beyond grades.

In Singapore, we see echoes of that obsession in the billions-dollar tuition industry and efforts to pad and embellish GPAs.

Sander’s solution is to replace much of the admissions process for elite universities with, essentially, a lottery. Take the thousands of applications, screen out those who would not flourish, and toss the rest down the stairs, then pick up as many files as you have space for and leave it at that. I don’t propose that we hand students over to chance, nor that we abandon meritocracy. But we can broaden our conception of “merit”, while ensuring that we do not confuse merit with value.

There is a growing realisation that more diverse factors should be considered for university admission, says the writer. That includes controlling for the impact that wealth has on the accumulation of academic achievement, as well as shifting the focus from past achievement to future potential.

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