

Imagine having skills training during NS for the next phase of your life

It's time for our institutions to explore ways to reduce the costs of national service so that our young servicemen are confident and ready to pursue higher education or careers.

Chew Han Ei and Shane Pereira

It was a showcase of transformative history and awe-inspiring aerial capability, as the Republic of Singapore Air Force commemorated its 55th anniversary this year with an open house earlier in September.

As researchers who have just completed a national study on public attitudes towards national service (NS), we could not pass up the opportunity to join the huge crowds at the exhibition. No matter how many times you've seen it, the spectacle of F-15SG and F-16 fighter aircraft bursting through the clouds is always breathtaking.

Even as we revelled in the atmosphere, we could not help but be reminded that the majority of those who were hosting the event were full-time national servicemen (NSFs).

For generations, our young Singaporean men have deferred education and career pursuits to defend and protect our country. They undergo a rigorous period of training during NS, as they transform into operationally ready soldiers, equipped and prepared to

guard the nation.

In a volatile world shaped by uncertain political dynamics, Singapore's embrace of mandatory NS stands as a testament to its commitment to unity, resilience, and shared responsibility among citizens. Indeed, in our study, an overwhelming majority of respondents (93 per cent) expressed support for compulsory NS, even in the absence of immediate threats to the nation. Families and employers were similarly supportive.

But some respondents and parents we spoke to mentioned how they were concerned that "brains would be rusty" from being away from an academic routine. They also shared their concerns about adjusting to academic life or transitioning into the workforce after NS.

While Singapore's commitment to NS remains unwavering, it is time to acknowledge and look deeper into the costs and disruptions faced by young men stepping into this important journey.

ADDRESSING THE COSTS OF SERVING

Balancing educational pursuits and career aspirations with service

commitments poses dilemmas for NSFs. The findings from our study reflect these tensions.

The perception that NS is important for acquiring skills useful for civilian employment dropped from 82 per cent in 2013 to 71 per cent in 2022. Given the rapidly evolving labour market, NS might increasingly be perceived as a disruptor of work.

This challenge, however, holds the potential to become a catalyst for growth.

We suggested to the Ministry of Defence an expansion of skills training beyond conventional soldiering skills, particularly just before NSFs transit back to their civilian lives.

Already, the Digital and Intelligence Service, the fourth arm of the Singapore Armed Forces, is securing our digital spaces, and NSFs from this service will no doubt continue to defend Singapore's security even after their active service.

But why not expand the basic skills of cyber hygiene to all servicemen? And why not take it further and introduce skills training from other sectors that are relevant to the educational or

career pathways of individual NSFs, so they, too, can be ready for the transition back into the civilian world?

TIMELY SKILLS ACQUISITION

NS should be and has always been about the country's military defence first.

Most Singaporeans in fact agree that the NS experience helps to teach important life values and develop leadership skills (95 per cent) that are useful for civilian life and jobs.

But as the economic pressures for upskilling grow, our institutions may need to think harder about how to mitigate the costs of service while nurturing other skill sets that could benefit our young soldiers after NS.

One practical idea would be to focus on transitioning servicemen in their final months of service. These transitional programmes can be tailored in at least two ways, depending on the next stage of their life journeys.

For the young men transitioning back to being students, the programmes can focus on helping them re-adapt to life in an

academic environment. Refresher courses for reading, writing, computer skills, public speaking and how to study would help smoothen the transition back to a learning environment. Having some structured and protected time to embark on these refresher courses can encourage them to restart their learning journeys.

For those awaiting school admission, acquiring these valuable skills will enable them to secure internships or temporary work opportunities before the next stage of their education begins. These skills can even be accredited by certified training providers, and these micro-certifications will give the young men a competitive advantage as they transition into civilian life.

For the other young men transitioning directly into the workforce after their NS commitments, skill-building can focus on matching their skills with the demands of the work landscape. Their transitional programmes can include practical skills such as writing a resume or short courses in high-demand skills that are relevant to their

future careers. Mindef could also consider partnering organisations such as the National Trades Union Congress on this front.

Equipped with these skill sets, the young servicemen will enter the workforce more prepared and confident. By offsetting service costs through such timely skills training, Singapore will transform its national service into an enduring investment, benefiting individuals and society alike.

This approach of incorporating skills training in a targeted manner mirrors Singapore's commitment to nurturing citizens prepared for a rapidly evolving world.

At the heart of Singapore's narrative in Total Defence lies a blend of challenges and solutions; we just need to look hard enough to find the solutions.

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Visitors and servicemen at a media preview of the Republic of Singapore Air Force's open house earlier in September. In a study conducted by the writers, 93 per cent of respondents expressed support for compulsory national service, even in the absence of immediate threats to the nation. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY