Source: *The Straits Times*, pA14
Date: 12 October 2025

Education system will evolve further to prepare students for the future: Ong Ye Kung

Vanessa Paige Chelvan
Correspondent

Education has been central to Singapore's progress as a nation, said Coordinating Minister for Social Policies Ong Ye Kung on Oct 11, describing it as "the most powerful social equaliser".

"It allows every Singaporean to realise their potential regardless of background and nurtures them to contribute to family, community and country," said Mr Ong, who is also Health Minister.

Malay/Muslim self-help group Yayasan Mendaki has been a steadfast champion of this cause, he said at the annual Anugerah Mendaki awards, held at the NUS University Cultural Centre where 529 students received awards.

Anugerah Mendaki was introduced in 1982 to recognise Malay/Muslim students who have done exceptionally well in the national examinations or obtained first class honours at reputable universities locally or abroad.

"Just as education transforms young lives, it must also constantly transform itself," Mr Ong told award recipients and their families.

Singapore's education system has evolved over the years to meet the changing needs of society and the economy, he said. And it will undergo further shifts to prepare students for a different future, shaped by technology, globalisation, demography and climate change.

Education here was fragmented in the early years, and delivered to different standards and languages of instruction, he said. The country then moved towards a unified system with a national curriculum and bilingualism, which remains a cornerstone of education policy today.

At the same time, Singapore adopted English as the common working language while mother tongue languages kept people rooted in their culture and tradition.

In the 1970s, high dropout rates prompted the introduction of streaming to allow students to learn at different paces.

More polytechnics were built, and the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) was set up. Today, about three in four students pursue technical education at either ITE or the polytechnics, Mr Ong said.

The 1990s ushered in the age of computerisation, as Singapore transitioned to a knowledge-based economy and moved to develop students more holistically, by nurturing their skills in critical thinking, creativity and independent learning.

(From left) Coordinating Minister for Social Policies Ong Ye Kung and Mendaki chairman Zaqy Mohamad with one of the recipients of the annual Anugerah Mendaki awards. Altogether 529 students received the awards. PHOTO: YAYASAN MENDAKI

More recently, the Ministry of Education (MOE) reduced examinations to free up curriculum time, Mr Ong said. The ministry also replaced the finely differentiated PSLE T-Score with a broader Achievement Level scoring system and phased out secondary school streaming.

MOE has also introduced the early admission exercise for institutes of higher learning, allowing students to be admitted based on talents and interests, and not just academic results.

These efforts amount to a "major reform" of the education system, said Mr Ong.

First, young Singaporeans need to prepare for a world shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), which will be an inseparable part of their lives, Mr Ong said. "Our educators must be able to harness it for teaching, and guide students to use AI wisely and responsibly."

"(We must) ensure that students do not become over-reliant on AI, such that we lose our basic skills as human beings to communicate, to try, to make mistakes, learn and master a skill," he cautioned.

Mr Ong said that everything he is good at doing today comes from making mistakes and learning from them. "If I had relied on AI, I would have never learnt it."

Second, students' holistic development must be strengthened, especially their mental health and well-being, he said.

Young people today grow up with smart devices, which have a profound impact on their socio-emotional development, he said, urging schools, families and communities to support those who need help.

Third, education should help students achieve their full potential, regardless of their background or starting point.

"Establishing multiple pathways to success in our education system is central to helping Singaporeans fulfil their full potential," he said, adding that more will be done for students from vulnerable backgrounds and those with special educational needs.

He also acknowledged Mendaki's role in ensuring that the Malay/Muslim community progresses in step with the nation, and in equipping students to be valuable members of society.

Mr Ong congratulated the award recipients, commending them for doing their best and giving back to the community. "In doing so, you will not only shape your own future, but also strengthen your community and Singapore."

vpchelvan@sph.com.sg

Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.