WHAT SINGAPORE NEEDS ARE POLYMATHS

No need to fear the death of technocracy

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Liberal arts education is failing in Singapore. This is the snap judgment made on some social media posts following the news last week that about 3 per cent of Yale-NUS College students have chosen to drop out of the country's first liberal arts college, apparently because some of them felt the courses covered a broad range of subjects without going into their preferred level of depth.

Considering that all new setups experience teething issues, the online reaction against liberal arts education is nothing short of a knee-jerk response.

This specific reaction masks something deeper at play — a latent fear of the death of technocracy.

Technocracy is the idea that a nation is best managed by well-educated experts, preferably those who excel in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

The assumption is that such individuals are able to look at issues logically and work through them systemically.

To sceptics, a liberal arts education does not produce experts but dilettantes, people who cultivate an area of interest without a real knowledge or strong grasp of any discipline.

This point is echoed by what one former Yale-NUS student said about leaving the institution: "In essence, we covered a lot of material, but we never really went in depth for each of them and I guess that's the nature of liberal arts, so to speak."

Could investment in liberal arts ed-

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ucation unravel the Singapore Story? Not quite. If we play it right, Singapore could even flourish from our ventures into the liberal arts. After all, we are not alone in this. As Forbes reported earlier this month, liberal arts colleges are springing up in South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan — Asian societies that, similar to ours, have traditionally favoured specialised education over a holistic syllabus.

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First, it must be said that Singapore is not in any immediate danger of losing its competitive edge as a bastion for nurturing technical talent. A recent OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development) survey of global education ranks us top in terms of math and science performance.

Singapore's global reputation surpasses statistics. In popular culture, we wowed the world when a primary school math problem went viral, as did Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's source code for solving Sudoku puzzles.

Considering what we have put in place, Singapore is not likely to lose its technocratic lead. Other than the keen focus on science and math in lower education, the likes of polytechnics, Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs) and the Singapore Institute of

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Technology (SIT) guarantee that this little red dot will never be short of technical talents at all levels of society.

However, how do we ensure that our enthusiasm for technocracy does not degenerate into some form of "technocratic frenzy"?

This enduring human predicament has captured our imagination time and again. Two centuries ago, Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein came as a warning of science's monstrous effects.

These days, the Hollywood blockbuster Avengers: Age of Ultron speculates the same of technology.

In the real world, some have come to question if the invention of the atomic bomb has led to a better world or made mass murder easier. As we face the threat of global warming, cars that run on fossil fuel can be looked at as either enabling travel, or destroying the Earth.

Here, the case can be made for Singapore to undergo a certain metamorphosis. In an increasingly interconnected world, a bustling metropolis such as ours can no longer privilege one way of being over a cacophony of so many others.

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Simply put, a polymath is someone who is able to draw from varying disciplines and influences when approaching a problem. A polymath is not a technocrat who would prioritise technical skills in solving a puzzle, no matter how broadly educated he or she is.

Polymaths are also not imaginary characters who can only be found within the pages of books. Leonardo da Vinci's dabbling in math and art has positioned him as the de facto polymath.

Closer to home, one can point to Philippine revolutionary figure, author and ophthalmologist Jose Rizal. Then there is Steve Jobs, who I would argue is a polymath more than a tech guru. Despite dropping out of Reed College, Jobs took a keen interest in culture and the arts in his time there.

He also famously said: "It is in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough—it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing."

All three personages had contributed to the advancement of not only their nation, but humanity as a whole. A polymathic citizenry would certainly make Singapore a much more dynamic place.

Finally, Jobs' conviction in the liberal arts is worth some further deliberation as we invest in two such institutions, the Yale-NUS College and the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD).

It is good to focus on the promise of a balanced education, where the humanities matter as much as the sciences. Do the math. The liberal arts can make all the difference.