

By Invitation

The value of research in the social sciences

For better social and cultural policymaking, Singapore needs to develop its own research in the social sciences



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For The Straits Times

Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam last year announced a 45 per cent increase in funding for research in the social sciences and humanities in Singapore.

He said: "Our region today is a fascinating and fertile ground for study, but scholarship has not caught up with its growing importance. We can and must build up this scholarship in the region that can inform and spur both policy reform and the initiatives of societal leaders."

The new programmes funded by the Social Science Research Council do indeed give Singaporeans a wonderful opportunity to strengthen their understanding of their own culture and of the societies of South-east Asia.

Singapore has developed its reputation as a worldwide research leader mainly in the fields of science, technology and medicine. But the social sciences and humanities also offer important fields of research that will strengthen Singaporeans' self-understanding, as I have seen in my work with the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the American National Endowment for the Humanities.

The modern social sciences developed in Europe from the Renaissance onwards as societies became increasingly complex. Traditionally, questions about the right way to organise society were a branch of philosophy or were informed by religious beliefs. Starting with Renaissance political theorists like Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, modern thinkers tried to base their ideas about how society should be ruled on empirical observations about how societies actually function.

With the rise of economics in the 18th century and then sociology and psychology in the 19th century, the early social scientists developed more rigorous methods of observing and analysing social trends.

The founders of the social sciences wanted their disciplines to treat human concerns scientifically, but in reality the social sciences have always been a mixture of scientific and humanistic inquiry.

While some forms of social science, like psychology, allow for the experimental method, in many

cases it is impossible to experiment on large-scale social issues. Rather than base their theories purely on observation, social scientists must also make use of models, theoretical constructs and intuition.

The best social scientific research combines an intuitive understanding of human motivations with rigorous methods for testing hypotheses.

As a result, it is particularly important for Singapore to develop its own social scientific research since many trends observed in other parts of the world may manifest themselves differently here in South-east Asia.

Readers may wonder what kinds of research are represented by the social sciences and humanities.

These fields range from scientific study of cognitive functions in psychology, to the analysis of social issues and trends and the history of Asian culture.

I believe that besides traditional scientific research, scholarship in the social sciences and humanities can make a difference to policies today and help us better understand the history and culture of this diverse region.

Here are some examples of social science research being done by my colleagues that can help us better understand ourselves and the society we live in:

- At Yale-NUS College, Dr Jean Liu, a psychologist, studies how people in modern environments respond to various types of incentives and rewards. For example, one of her current projects explores the "opt-out" system for organ donation in Singapore and what policies would make people more likely to volunteer as organ donors. The branch of the social sciences that is sometimes called "the behavioural sciences" seeks to understand human behaviour through careful experimental study.

There is plenty of evidence that people in different cultures react differently to various situations. It is thus important for Singapore to go beyond importing Western knowledge, to develop its own understanding of human behaviour as it is manifested in this region. Dr Liu's research was recently recognised with the Singapore Academy of Medicine's silver award for best publication.



- Historian Claudine Ang has conducted prize-winning research on the history of Chinese culture in South-east Asia, especially the spread of Chinese culture in Vietnam in the 18th century.

This research requires knowledge of the complex history of the Chinese and Vietnamese languages and allows us to understand better the mix of cultures in South-east Asia and the roots of conflicts between North and South Vietnam as well as between Vietnam and Cambodia. Understanding the history of Chinese migration in South-east Asia can help us to understand Singapore's relations with its neighbours and the unique mix of cultures in this region.

Dr Ang's work won the Lauriston Sharp Prize for best doctoral dissertation on South-east Asian studies at Cornell University and she is currently revising the work for publication as a book.

- Environmental scholar Angel Hsu has been collaborating with faculty and graduate students at Yale University to pursue data-driven approaches to environmental challenges. Her team uses big data

techniques to analyse pollution in various regions across Asia and assess its impact on climate change. Working with networks of companies and non-governmental organisations, Dr Hsu is creating an international working group that will provide a scientific basis for efforts to slow climate change.

Her research has been published in important journals like *Nature* and has influenced discussions at the World Economic Forum in Davos and the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Paris.

This use of scientific and social-scientific evidence to inform policy decisions is a crucial example of the contributions that social scientists can make to improving the health of our region and our planet.

- Another of our colleagues, Assistant Professor Paul O'Keefe, has examined whether people believe their personal interests and passions are inherent (a "fixed mindset") or developed (a "growth mindset").

Working closely with Singapore's Ministry of Education, he has shown that a growth mindset leads to higher

levels of interest in a greater variety of academic topics.

He is currently working on an experiment at Yale-NUS that tests how these mindsets affect interest in students engaging in a diverse curriculum. This research could help local educators and policymakers make informed decisions on education-related policies and expand the various pathways that students could consider in their educational journey.

In today's challenging and ever-changing environment, policymakers need to have a strong grasp of public opinion and future trends while developing policies that are responsive and relevant. To tackle today's complex social issues, interdisciplinary research in humanities and social sciences plays a significant role.

Singapore's cultural and social policies will be better informed in the future as more researchers help us to understand the region's past, discern the major issues that confront us today and analyse the trends that will shape Singapore's future.

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