

Helping students develop future-ready skills

S'pore tops Asia in an index on preparing youth for the future, but areas such as global citizenship and inclusivity need attention

**S. Gopinathan
and Edmund Lim**

For The Straits Times

Singapore has improved its education system over the decades. In 1997, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong launched the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation vision to enhance the quality of learning, teaching and thinking in the education system.

In 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong introduced the Teach Less, Learn More initiative, which eventually reduced the curriculum load by 20 per cent and promoted active and independent learning.

This year, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung spoke about the Learn for Life movement, which promotes the lifelong learning of skills to prepare for an uncertain future.

Last year, Singapore's education system came out top in Asia in a comprehensive global index that looks at how effective countries are in equipping youth aged 15 to 24 years with the skills needed in future labour markets.

Singapore was ranked top in Asia and fifth out of 35 economies,

behind New Zealand, Canada, Finland and Switzerland, according to the Worldwide Educating for the Future Index (Wefi), commissioned by the Yidan Prize Foundation and launched by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The next highest-ranking Asian economy was Japan, at seventh place.

The index integrated views from 17 experts from Harvard, Stanford, Yale and Oxford universities, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Unesco, England, New Zealand, Norway and Singapore. It analysed the extent to which education systems nurture "future skills" such as interpersonal, problem-solving, critical-thinking, entrepreneurial and leadership skills, as well as the ability to thrive in a digital and multicultural world.

The Wefi examined "inputs" to education systems, instead of "outputs" such as test results, and has three main categories: policy environment (30 per cent), teaching environment (50 per cent) and socio-economic environment (20 per cent).

In education policy environment, Singapore emerged top, followed by New Zealand, Canada, Finland, United Kingdom, South Korea,

Taiwan, France and Australia. In teaching environment, it was eighth and in the socio-economic category, it was third.

Despite these achievements, Singapore still has room for further improvement when it comes to addressing issues such as: What are the skills required for the future? And, how do education systems develop these skills?

NEED FOR PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

The Wefi report on its index results noted that vital factors such as global citizenship and project-based learning have been neglected in many countries. There is a strong need to promote greater awareness and knowledge of global issues such as climate change, in addition to the development of analytical thinking and collaboration skills through project-based learning.

According to the research, fewer than half of the 35 economies evaluate project-based learning. Project-based learning is a teaching approach where students develop their knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time, investigating and responding to authentic and engaging challenges or questions. Planning ahead, it will be beneficial for Singaporean students to use project-based learning to cultivate skills for the future.

Skills such as leadership, critical thinking, problem solving,

collaboration and communication, along with initiative, curiosity and creativity, can be enhanced through effective project-based learning, civics and global-citizenship education.

Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) recently announced a calibrated reduction in examinations and tests to provide more time for engaged learning. Project-based teaching and assessment need to be improved as well. Schools can be given more support and autonomy in pedagogy and assessment.

Furthermore, class-size policies are significant as opportunities for more personalised learning and project-based learning are more likely to occur in smaller classes with a better student-teacher ratio.

In this global interconnected economy, another suggestion to develop "future skills" is to improve civics and social studies education through project-based learning in primary and secondary schools to

Despite these achievements, Singapore still has room for further improvement when it comes to addressing issues such as: What are the skills required for the future? And, how do education systems develop these skills?

enhance students' understanding and knowledge of the world, including South-east Asia and global issues.

Singapore has enhanced the way social studies are taught in secondary schools, but there is room for improvement. For instance, secondary and even primary school students can engage in project-based learning to positively respond to issues in society, as well as implement and review their proposed solutions.

The Wefi report encouraged governments to dedicate more resources to boost the profile, prestige and pay of teachers. On this, the MOE has been proactive in raising the status, career progression and remuneration of teachers. Singapore teachers are among the highest paid in Asia.

Teachers are generally highly respected in Singapore, with viable paths of progression in various career tracks. However, the attractive pay and career prospects for MOE teachers could also be expanded to include pre-school teachers and special education teachers.

IMPORTANCE OF OPENNESS

A final major point in the Wefi report noted the correlation between an open and tolerant society and a future-ready and holistic education. Economies that have cultural diversity, freedom of information and broader societal attitudes tend to be more

conducive to the growth of future-oriented and holistic education outcomes in their schools.

In addition to optimising the potential of our students and avoiding the labelling of students who are initially less academically inclined, more progress can be made in being more inclusive of special-needs children in mainstream schools. There can be more openness, inclusion and integration of these students as part of a future-oriented and holistic education. This will involve advanced planning and provision of resources, along with quality teacher preparation and smaller classes.

MOE can also purposefully consider ways to reduce the weightage of major high-stakes academic examinations such as the PSLE to give due emphasis to project-based learning and quality holistic assessment, in order to better prepare our students for the world ahead.

Singapore has made remarkable progress in education. At the same time, as it commemorates its bicentennial next year, leaders, policymakers and educators should continue to examine ways to enable our young to thrive in the present and future.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• S. Gopinathan is an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, and senior adviser of the Head (Human Capital and Education for Asian Development) Foundation. Edmund Lim is an academic director of an overseas education organisation.