

The problem with a single-dimensional definition of meritocracy

Focusing only on academic merit is unrealistic when we don't know what skills are needed in future. We need a meritocracy of many talents.

Adrian W. J. Kuah

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Those who defend meritocracy maintain that it is the best means by which resources – opportunities, scholarships, positions and so forth – are allocated in society. There is, at best, an acknowledgement of the excesses – such as inequality, elitism, disconnectedness – that a meritocracy produces.

But are these social ills merely the unintended consequences of a meritocracy that works too well? In my view, that is a fallacious and unnecessary argument. On the contrary, such ills are precisely the consequences that you should expect when a meritocracy works exactly as intended.

This is because meritocracy is essentially a contest that must produce winners and losers. This competitive aspect of meritocracy was mitigated by the fact that in newly independent Singapore, there were what might be termed “newbie” gains to reap and the early outcomes were seen as fair.

Starting from a low level of development with a more or less level playing field, social mobility was high for the early cohorts. For each cohort, there was also more room not only at the top, but at every rung of the ladder.

Over time, as the prizes became relatively scarcer, the gap between the top and consolation prizes also widened. Those who reach the top end up with jobs with much higher incomes and status, allowing them to buy lifestyles for themselves and their children that are markedly more comfortable than those who receive the consolation prizes.

As the visible gains from the rewards of meritocracy become more obvious, what became deeply entrenched is, to borrow from the words of English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, a state of



Singaporean meritocracy is too narrowly defined, in that it sorts people using overly restrictive academic criteria, says the writer. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

competition of all against all. More than that, it resulted in a system of inherited advantages and disadvantages that is passed on from one generation to another. And while inherited advantage can be squandered, inherited disadvantage is a legacy almost impossible to shake off.

The public angst about meritocracy is centred on the question of fairness. So is meritocracy fair? One needs to distinguish between procedural fairness and fairness of outcomes.

Meritocracy as a process is fair in the sense that the rules are known

ahead of time, and the contest is run transparently (for example, an examination, an audition, a selection trial, and so forth). Most importantly, the criterion for awarding the prize is straightforward: winner takes all. The marginal top scorer takes the last place in that elite school; too bad for your child.

The hand-wringing is over the expectation that a meritocracy levels the playing field. In fact, it does not; it merely dismantles an existing order, such as a system of inherited privilege, only to replace it with a new one based on what is

now deemed meritorious – which in Singapore has been academic merit.

And that new order, with time, sorts itself out in a manner that is unfair. More than that, unless the criteria for “meritorious” change, any meritocracy will reproduce itself in more or less the same way. Any equality that results in a meritocracy is a fleeting and unstable equilibrium.

One may venture into philosophical ruminations over the unfairness of outcomes that a meritocracy inevitably produces. The more practical problem of the Singaporean meritocracy is that it is too narrowly defined, in that it sorts people using overly restrictive academic criteria.

There is only one game in town – academic success – and it is creating a lack of diversity in societal talent that is not fit for purpose in these disruptive and complex times.

Take the recent changes to streaming in schools. As dramatic a shift as it seemed to be, the focus was primarily on removing the stigmatisation of labels for those in “slower” streams, and to reduce stress among students in what will remain a highly competitive school system. The point is that the system, in the main, is still fixated on academic criteria.

Using academic performance as a proxy for what it means to possess “merit” blinds us to other forms of capabilities and intelligence. It also makes the acknowledgement of extra-academic abilities simply an exercise in tokenism.

HEDGING OUR BETS

This needs to change, and not simply for altruistic reasons. There is a hard-headed pragmatism at work here: If we don't and can't know ahead of time which traits and skills are going to be useful for Industry 4.0, then I suggest we hedge at a societal level and cultivate and meaningfully reward a range of abilities beyond “book smarts”.

The current single-dimensional meritocracy, based on an unchanging and a priori criteria, results in tremendous waste: practised in this way, it chokes off serendipity and leads to frustrated and unrealised talent from unexpected quarters.

The best way to salvage Singapore's meritocracy is to have many meritocracies in operation at any one time. As the professional photographer's advice on how to take good pictures goes: “Take a lot. Some might be good.”

In addition to greater diversity in defining what counts as meritorious, we need a meritocracy that is less retrospective, and more prospective and risk-taking. Let me

illustrate this by way of a thought experiment.

Imagine you are the coach of a school tennis team, and you are tasked with filling the final spot on the roster. On the day of the selection trial, two boys show up. One boy, A, clearly looks the part, with multiple rackets and is decked out in tennis gear. The other, B, doesn't even have a racket and has to borrow one. They play a match, and the winner takes the cherished spot on the team.

Now, it turns out that A has had tennis lessons from a young age, and is quite the veteran on the circuit. B has never played, and has shown up simply out of curiosity.

Here are three scenarios facing you as the coach.

Let's say that A beats B. That is an expected result, and there is no disputing that A must be selected for the team.

And what if, against all odds, B beats A, whether convincingly or not? In this case, B should get the spot, and you now also have the happy problem of having uncovered a hidden natural talent.

Here's where it gets tricky. Imagine if A only narrowly defeats B – what would you do? A strict meritocracy, going by actual performance (in this case, the match just played), requires that you select A, at the expense of a possibly great-but-undeveloped talent. Meritocracy precludes discretion on the part of the coach. But if you selected B because you believe in his greater potential, you are essentially taking a gamble. More importantly, A would be outraged, to say nothing of his parents who had been paying for his tennis lessons.

To be sure, this little thought experiment is an over-simplification of reality. However, it does bring into sharp relief the implications of a meritocracy based on the strict adherence to past results. But exercising discretion to bet on potential is inherently risky, and creates another form of unfairness in outcomes.

The problem isn't that meritocracy still persists, and that it tends to produce (and reproduce) unfairness. Societies need a system for allocating resources, and all such systems invariably create unfairness and inequality.

The problem for Singapore's meritocracy is that it runs only one sort of contest, and as in the “tennis trial example”, it typically selects the tried-and-tested A, and seldom if ever takes a chance on the promise of B.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Dr Adrian W. J. Kuah is a senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.