Study: Strong support for NS, but fewer find it useful in civilian employment

IPS researchers recommend Mindful help men upskill and transit to life after NS

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While public support of national service (NS) in Singapore remains strong, it is viewed as less important in gaining job-relevant skills and improving job prospects, according to a new study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The study’s results released on Wednesday showed that 93 per cent of respondents would support compulsory NS, even if there were no immediate threats to Singapore, while 88 per cent said they would encourage their friends and loved ones to serve, even if NS was optional.

The researchers – Dr Chew Han Boon, Ms Suki Nair, Mr Paul Yen, Mr Daniel Lee, Ms Isabella Tan and Ms Elizabeth Low – wanted to understand public attitudes towards NS following changes in education, the work landscape of Singapore, and the geopolitical landscape.

They looked at the attitudes of those in service, and sought to identify challenges that the system needs to address in order that it is relevant and effective, and how to improve the NS experience.

The IPS had conducted a similar survey on public sentiments towards NS in 2013. Dr Chew, an IPS senior research fellow and the principal investigator for the study, said at a media briefing on Wednesday that a check on sentiment and perceptions about NS was due, given the changes that had taken place in Singapore society.

Singapore now has a population that is more educated, and parents are more involved in their sons’ NS journeys, said Dr Chew.

He added that geopolitical tensions and global uncertainty also increased the interest of respondents about how Singapore needed to defend itself.

Between July and October 2022, the researchers carried out a nationally representative survey of 1,002 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents (PRs) aged 17 and above, and across genders and ethnicities.

They also conducted 15 focus group discussions that included full-time national servicemen (NSmen), operationally ready national servicemen (ORNs), women, family and spouses of servicemen, Civil Service executives, and human resource (HR) managers from companies of various sizes.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were also done with 30 unemployable NSmen.

The Ministry of Defence (MInfD) funded the study, and questions for the study were framed in consultation with the ministry, said Dr Chew.

He added that the 2023 study showed that there was already “very strong support” for NS, with positive sentiment among respondents.

However, while there were not many reasons for support to go down, there was a reduction in the number of men who were strongly supportive of NS.

In 2013, what he noted from the 2023 study was that the number of respondents who strongly agreed with the relevance and role of NS grew.

The proportion of those who strongly agreed that NS is necessary for the defence of Singapore increased from 42 per cent in 2013 to 57 per cent in 2022.

Similarly, the proportion of respondents who strongly agreed that NS provides the security needed for Singapore to develop and prosper increased from 37 per cent in 2013 to 53 per cent in 2022.

Despite strong support for defence, there was a reduction in support towards civilian skills and improving job prospects.

The study found that perceptions of NS as important and valuable for gaining job skills and improving job prospects weakened since 2013. Some respondents raised issues of finding a balance between serving the nation and supporting their families.

In focus group discussions, participants who worked in HR expressed concerns about the cost to the companies when male employees were away, even though they strongly supported reserve commitments.

While 94 per cent of respondents viewed NS as a “rite of passage for the Singaporean man”, 79 per cent of them thought NS is important for learning skills useful for civilian employment – down from 82 per cent in 2013.

Dr Chew said that the general call nationwide to upskill should extend to national servicemen.

The research team recommended that Mindful should look at how to help servicemen, especially those in their final months of service, transit to the next phase, whether as a student or worker.

“Create opportunities to learn useful skills such as writing a curriculum vitae, financial management or just picking up short courses to round them for the transition,” said Dr Chew.

A spokesperson for Mindful said the ministry recognises the importance of helping servicemen make the transition to work or school.

For example, NS has access to the SkillsFuture@SG Learning e-Experience Platform, which gives them access to online courses, an online repository of resources, and a job and career portal.

They also get opportunities to participate in SkillsFuture@SG career and education talks during their full-time NS.

The study also suggested that more attention could be paid to those from lower-income households, whose ability to contribute to income may be diminished when fulfilling their NS duties.

A Mindful spokesperson said that Mindful’s mission is to help servicemen continue their learning in education, career, and personal development.

Overall, the study’s findings affirmed the strong conviction that NS contributes to national defence and economic development, noted the researchers.

Dr Chew said: “The results are a clear indication that NS is an integral part of Singapore’s society. In fact, it has become more integral in the current milieu and tools set to remain so for the future.”

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