

ET CETERA (есеї, роздуми, враження)

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EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

In this paper, I would like to give an overview of the educational system in Singapore and distinguish its main features that have led it to excellence and world's fame.

In 2015, the OECD¹ rated Singapore's educational system the best in the world. According to the latest PISA²-rating published in 2018, Singaporean students scored higher in scholastic performance in reading, science, and mathematics than 15-year-old students from nearly 80 countries worldwide, and ranked second only to China (Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang). In 2020, the PISA reported that Singaporeans made up half of the best scorers in the IB examinations around the globe.

Singapore's educational system is controlled by the Ministry of Education (MOE) that establishes, directs, and checks the implementation of the educational policies of the country. The system comprises 4 levels of education: preschool, primary school, secondary school, and post-secondary education. Preschool education in Singapore consists of playgroups and kindergartens enrolling children aged three to six. Primary education normally starts when children are aged 7 and goes all the way until grade Primary 6 when children are 12 years old. Schoolchildren either finish secondary level when they are 17 years old or enroll at a post-secondary educational establishment like a polytechnic or a junior college aged beyond 16 or 17. After graduating from a polytechnic (where one can receive professional education to support the technological and economical needs of the country) or a junior college (which is a pre-university institution for students taking IB or GCE Advanced Level exams), students can continue their education at a university.

Primary education is compulsory in Singapore; it is a criminal offence for parents who neglect their children, not enroll them to school, and fail to check children's systematic school attendance. The MOE emphasizes the fundamental role parents play in their children's education as all children in the country are considered equally smart. There is therefore a tendency nowadays to praise children's efforts more than their inherited intelligence and it is only their families and children themselves who are held accountable for their own results and progress at school.



¹ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

² The Program for International Student Assessment

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According to Singapore's budget report issued in 2020, the government spent around 20% of its budget on education, financing state-run and government-assisted educational establishments³.

Education in Singapore is considered to be so efficient due to highly scripted curricula and assessment strategic plans, which are mainly focused on teaching students problem-solving skills and providing them with practical knowledge in specific subjects. Even so, the educational system is tailored primarily to teach students how to pass exams successfully and is often criticized for being too result-oriented, rigid, and specialized. In 2017, after students had reported high levels of stress provoked by academic rigor, the MOE launched 'Teach Less, Learn More' strategy, which is designed to transform the usual educational philosophy from being quantitative to qualitative.

It goes without saying that a professionally trained team of educators make the educational miracle in Singapore possible. The government is regularly investing in its teaching force, providing them with necessary trainings and, most importantly, offering them competitive salaries, which has significantly increased the prestige of the teaching profession and attracted the best graduates into the sphere of education. The Singapore National Institute of Education (NIE) is famous for its teacher education as well as educational research. The NIE trains future academic staff according to their innovative "Teacher Education Model for the 21st Century" program. This model is designed to prepare teachers for the challenges of the new digital era.

Due to its convenient strategic geopolitical location, Singapore attracts expatriates from all around the world. There are around 80 international schools for expat children which among others provide British, American, Indian, and IB curricula. According to Singapore law, local children are not allowed to go to international schools, though three international schools (International Anglo-Chinese School, Saint-Joseph's International School and Hwa Chong International School) were given a permission by MOE to enroll both international and local children. These schools must play the national anthem and take the pledge every morning as well as comply with the county's multilingualism policy like every other local school in Singapore.

Since Singapore is a multinational country, its mother tongue policy is a keystone of its education system. There are four official languages in the country: English, Chinese (Mandarin), Malay, and Tamil. The mother tongue policy was adopted in 1966. It was intended to make English a common mean of communication to facilitate Singapore's plan to enter the world economy.

Knowledge of the English language as a lingua franca is enforced through its use as the instruction language. In addition to English, children must take a 'mother tongue' subject: Standard Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. Non-Tamil South Asian students are offered classes in Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi or Urdu. It is different for Chinese: non-Mandarin speaking students of Cantonese background must learn standard Mandarin as Cantonese is not taught. In 1979, the country launched its "Speak Mandarin" campaign which was aimed at promoting standard Mandarin as a tool for smooth integration of local population into the Chinese community, in part through discouraging other Chinese dialects. Students of Malay or Indonesian background must learn Malay. Students of other races can choose

³ For reference, Ukraine spent only 4.8% of its budget on education in 2021.

among Tamil, Mandarin, and Malay. ‘Mother tongue’ classes not only teach students their native language but also give perspective on their culture and identity, preserving multiculturalism and ethnical diversity alongside with Asian values.

In 2021, Singapore topped Bloomberg Covid Resilience Ranking of world’s best place to be amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Though at the top of various rankings, Singapore still gets criticized for its tough education system. Not only is it too quantitative, but it also lacks emphasis on critical and creative thinking. Outside of education, creative professions receive little emphasis. In 2020, The Straits Times – the leading daily newspaper based in Singapore – listed artist as a number one non-essential job in Singapore.

In recent years, the government has altered its policy allowing schoolchildren more flexibility to cross over different specializations. Hopefully, it will foster a new generation of great thinkers, a generation Lee Kuan Yew would be proud of, a generation that will make this paradise-island even a much better place than today.

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