

## Dr Tony Tan's speech at the Singapore Management University

by: Benjamin Cheah



Policies that place Singaporeans first in education. Schools that offer the widest range of programmes to the widest range of people. A flexible education system that prepares students for the workforce and is integrated with industry and the world.

These are the key ideas in Dr Tony Tan's speech on higher education at the Singapore Management University on Tuesday morning. While Dr. Tan had spent three decades shaping higher education in Singapore during his tenure as a Cabinet minister, and is now running for President, he stressed that he was speaking as a private citizen.

### **Singaporeans first**

Dr Tan's policies when he was the Education Minister have received widespread criticisms online. The critiques said that Dr Tan pursued policies that increased the intake of foreign students in local universities instead of Singaporeans.

Responding to these remarks in his speech, Dr Tan affirmed a 'Singaporeans first' policy, saying that the interests of Singaporeans should come first. Dr Tan said "our primary responsibility is to Singaporeans". He reiterated that Singaporeans should be given every opportunity to realize their potential and find their path.

He emphasised that Singapore citizens already have priority entrance to primary and secondary schools, and there are many scholarships and subsidies for Singaporeans to pursue higher education at home or abroad. Singaporean students are also able to take

advantage of education opportunities “which give them a good start in life despite their family background”, he said.

To further ensure Singaporeans can take advantage of these opportunities, he suggested that the government should monitor the proportion of foreign students in tertiary institutions. This according to him, would ensure Singaporeans are the main beneficiaries of education policies, and that the proportion of foreign students “matches the present and future needs” of society.

In his speech, Dr Tan rejected the notion of adopting a ‘Singaporeans only’ policy, saying that it would be “a grave mistake” as “Singapore is an international city.”

He said that this would “limit the talented individuals” who contribute to Singapore, and restrict Singapore’s ability to engage in collaborative research that has placed Singaporean universities “in the very top ranks of universities” worldwide.



### **Emerging trends**

Stressing that the future is unpredictable and that change is the only constant in the global economy, Dr Tan highlighted three emerging trends.

First he said, developing countries, especially China and India, are growing at unprecedented rates. He said that this “puts pressure on Singapore to maintain a highly-skilled workforce that leads the region”.

This requires an able and flexible education system, enabling workers to upgrade existing skills or develop new ones. This is the only way, he said, to keep up with neighbours who have more natural resources and larger labour pools.

The second emerging trend is that demand for goods is growing in unpredictable ways. Arguing that rising affluence will “fuel the growth of an increasingly specialized services sector” to cater to different tastes, Dr Tan predicted that new classes of jobs would be created, most notably in services and entertainment sectors. As a result of which Dr. Tan added, people will soon have a wider range of careers.

Increasing affluence which is accompanied by changes in life expectancies and lifestyle choices is the third emerging trend.

It must be expected that people would live longer, and have longer and more diverse careers, expressed Dr Tan. In this new economy many he anticipate would have two or more careers; and for a variety of reasons, ranging from pure economic reasons to self-actualisation.

In light of these emerging trends, Dr. Tan argued that the challenge for higher education in Singapore is to be more flexible without compromising national standards of excellence in education.

### **Guiding principles**

Singapore has got no choice but to remain an open society in the face of increased competition the future would bring said Dr Tan. he believes that Singapore should continue to focus on nation building and strengthening social cohesion.

He then outlined three guiding principles that he believes should guide the development of higher education in Singapore.

The first principle according to Dr Tan is comprehensiveness. He stressed that higher education should cater both to the needs of the economy and inclination of learners and all citizens (including the injured and the people with disabilities) should have a chance to realize their full potential.

Tertiary institutions he believes should be able to cater to a significant proportion of this cohort, and also to develop courses to cater to high demand areas as well as in emerging or niche fields.

Individuals Dr Tan requested, should learn widely even while developing specialist skills. Dr Tan said that flexibility is the second principle. Higher education has a history of being linear, with little prospects of switching paths. Dr Tan asserted in his speech that this “a very narrow view of education”, “a very limited view of human potential” and in untenable.

He said higher education should offer a range of opportunities, and allow people to switch between tertiary institutions.

He added that Singapore should continue to develop Continuing Education and Training programmes to prepare workers “for a more dynamic future and a longer working life.” CET programmes include upgrading programmes in public institutions, and courses in private education institutes.

The third principle according to Dr Tan, is openness. He foresees a future where higher education institutions be open and connected to each other and the world. Higher learning institutions should continue and grow exchange and immersion programmes.

Singapore's institutions he said, should use local, regional and global networks to “attract and retain the very best students and faculty”, to prepare local students for international careers, and to be “at the cutting edge of research.”

Dr Tan encouraged private foundations and corporations to provide mentorship, research collaboration and learning opportunities to tertiary institutions, in addition to financial support.

Currently, courses and funding in institutions of higher learning, enable students to start careers. Dr Tan predicted that this would change and that the educational system of the future will increase the number of entrepreneurs. Schools he believes, should also give individuals the ability to spot and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

Higher education according to Dr Tan, should not only prepare the individual for a career, but should also contribute to society and life.

He called institutions to nurture their students' idealism into “lifelong commitments to work for the betterment of society.” He however acknowledged that it's up to the individual to balance the pursuit of academic excellence and societal contributions.



### Question time

While the lecture was focused on higher education in Singapore, several questions directed during the question time at Dr Tan, focused on his political aspirations and the stances he would take if elected.

In the field of higher education, Dr Tan said that the President would be able to use his presence, patronage, and support of causes to maintain and improve existing standards of education.

When asked by the Associated Press if he believed Singapore's Ministers, and the President, were paid too much, Dr Tan said that he would abide by the findings of the commission established to look into ministerial salaries.

A student asked Dr Tan if he would guarantee limitless bank deposits. Dr Tan said one should "never say never". He said that such action must be seen in context, noting that Ben Bernanke of the US Federal Reserve embarked on similar measures to save the American, and thereby international, economy during the late 2000s financial crisis.

Dr Tan emphasised that "the action isn't as important as the ability to take action", and that Singapore has sufficient reserves to take drastic measures if necessary.

When the lecture ended, the press door-stopped Dr Tan as he was about to leave and a reporter asked him about his stance on the Graduate Mother's Scheme. The mainstream media used this as an example to showcase his supposed independence from the ruling People's Action Party, but bloggers have argued that Dr Tan supported the scheme.

Dr Tan said that he looked at the policy, decided that it was unfair, and changed his mind. He then proceeded to work towards convincing his then-colleagues to drop the policy.



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Throughout the lecture, Dr Tan seemed quite aware of the public interest in his aspirations to be the next Elected president, and appeared to distance himself from it as much as possible. He presented himself as an unusually-well informed private citizen instead of as a Presidential hopeful.

Despite this, he could not entirely escape the spectre of his political ambitions.