



SPEECHES/INTERVIEWS

July 27, 2019

Speech by Minister for Education Mr Ong Ye Kung, at the 2019 Raffles Institution Founder's Day

Mr Choo Chiau Beng, Chairman of the Raffles Institution (RI) Board of Governors

Members of the Board of Governors

Ms Denise Phua, Mayor of Central CDC

Mr Frederick Yeo, Principal of RI

Former Principals of RI

Colleagues, parents, and students,

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. A very good morning to everyone. It is my pleasure to come back to RI, and to speak to you this morning. Thank you all for coming.

HISTORY OF RAFFLES INSTITUTION

2. This year's Founder's Day is special and coincides with Singapore's Bicentennial commemoration. Sir Stamford Raffles' declaration of Singapore as a free port changed the fate of our country. The British left behind important institutions from which Singapore could build upon – the civil service, the rule of law, an education system, in which Raffles Institution, or RI, is a shining gem. Some of you may know that our school's motto came from the coat of arms of Sir Stamford Raffles.

3. As the school grew over the decades, it admitted bright local students from all backgrounds, and with a good education, they went on to have successful careers and contribute to society. RI graduates have gone on to become successful "thinkers, leaders, and pioneers" in many fields, in becoming professionals, entrepreneurs, senior executives, and artists, amongst others. They run companies and lead our nation.

4. In many ways, the development of RI is a reflection of Singapore's development. Hence, the values which RI stood for are also those cherished by Singapore society – two very prominent ones come to mind: excellence and meritocracy.

5. I have no doubt that RI will continue to strive for excellence, and produce graduates with stellar qualities for generations to come. I only have two hopes for our graduates. One, I hope a good proportion of them may join the public service. They have so many options today, but I hope they leave a space for the public service because we need a fair share of talent, and leadership and good governance are very vital for a small country like Singapore. Two, as Minister for Education, I hope more will choose to attend our local autonomous universities, which have become amongst the best in the world. I am very happy to note that amongst this year's 93 Public Service Commission (PSC) Scholars, 27 are attending our local universities. Out of the 27, five are from RI.

6. Meritocracy, however, is under siege. All around the world, faith in meritocracy is weakening, as people start to see its outcomes as somewhat unjust. Parents who succeeded under the system spared no effort or resources to invest in their children and ensure that their children do well in education, while poorer parents cannot afford to do the same.

Children with the same inherent abilities may therefore end up with different outcomes. Left on its own, success and privilege become encrusted at the top, and over time, this morphs into class stratification.

7. As the originator of the term “meritocracy” Michael Young wrote in a commentary in 2001, and I quote – “It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit. It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class, without room in it for others.”

8. In this climate, when people are perturbed by the state of social inequality, they will inevitably look to the diversity of RI’s student population almost instinctively, and ask “What is RI doing about it?”. Rafflesians themselves are asking the question. Fairly or unfairly, this is a burden that RI has to carry, because the institution is such a powerful symbol of excellence and fair progression through merit and capability. It is the bellwether for the state of meritocracy and social mobility in Singapore.

9. Today, I will argue that meritocracy has not failed us, and will remain a key principle for recognising individuals. Because even those who rail against meritocracy struggle to come up with a better system. Would we prefer a birth right system? Or nepotism? Or a system that ensures equal outcomes like communism? Or perhaps resort to lotteries for all appointments and promotions? Universities in the United States have adopted policies such as affirmative action on and off since the 1960s, but this has not stopped the more affluent from finding ways to still emerge winners.

10. It boils down to the fact that meritocracy may not be a perfect system. It is not, but it is the still the best system we know. However, this does not mean that we cannot do anything to improve it. The impetus is on us – not just the Government, but all of us – to overcome the limitations of meritocracy, and consciously fight against the ossification of social classes. And I would like to present to you three suggestions today that can contribute to this effort.

CALIBRATE EXPECTATIONS OF MERITOCRACY

11. First, we need to recognise that we are in a different phase of development. Meritocracy, even when remaining the same in spirit, will look different at the outset. We need to adjust our perspective with the times.

12. Let me give you an illustration. For the cohort of students that entered Primary 1 in 2000, around 8% of students who lived in 1-2 room flats successfully enrolled into local university courses. If we compare that with the cohort 15 years ago, or those who entered Primary 1 in 1985, the number was higher, at around 11%.

13. Many of us may conclude – “A drop of three percentage points! No wonder there are not so many students from 1-2 room flats in universities nowadays. Social mobility has slowed, inequality has worsened, meritocracy has failed!” That’s how most of us will react.

14. But our perspective will change once we realise that amongst the 1985 cohort, about a fifth, or 20%, lived in 1-2 room flats. For the 2000 cohort, this figure has fallen to 1.4% a 13-fold reduction. Life has improved, and they have moved out of their 1-2 room flats. Far fewer students living in 1-2 room flats are in universities now, not because meritocracy has failed, but because there are simply fewer students living in 1-2 room flats to start. In other words, meritocracy has succeeded in moving them out of poverty.

15. That is what I call the paradox of achievement. The more we lift people out of poverty, the more we feel that inequality has worsened. In a similar vein, while the profile of RI students is somewhat skewed towards the higher income, it is not excessively distorted either. Today, over half of RI students live in public housing.

16. I believe society is reasonable, and will calibrate its expectations of meritocracy, provided it is kept informed of how the larger environment and profile of our population has changed and evolved.

BROADEN THE DEFINITION OF MERITOCRACY

17. Second, we need to broaden the definition of merit. There is validity in the criticism that the current definition is too narrowly focused on academic achievement. But I am very happy to hear what Principal Frederick Yeo has done, to calibrate the academic assessments within RI. We have placed too much emphasis on IQ and being exam-smart, at the expense of EQ and being street-smart.

18. But broadening meritocracy does not mean lowering of standards. We still take pride in working hard, excelling, and maintaining high standards in everything we do. That is what accords Singapore and Singaporeans the good reputation we enjoy internationally. What we want to ensure is that standards for something as complex as human capability and potential are not measured with one single ruler – academic excellence – there must be other rulers and other yardsticks.

19. That is why we are making comprehensive adjustments throughout the entire education system – from the PSLE scoring system, the basis for Direct School Admission, and admission to polytechnics and universities. When we talk about the SkillsFuture movement, it is much more than just training programmes. Underlying it is the principle of valuing people of different aptitudes and strengths, and recognising diverse talents.

20. It is an approach already used in many industries and companies. Many start-ups and technology companies mostly recruit based on skills, not academic results. Artificial Intelligence (AI) will in time help employers sieve out applicants with the right skills, which will make sorting solely by academic grades outdated and ineffective. When I speak to CEOs, almost everyone agrees that they have to hire based on skills and not just academic grades, so I think the impediments to better hiring policies today are largely operational in nature, and will be overcome with time.

UPLIFT, UPLIFT, UPLIFT

21. Third suggestion, we must all put in a strong effort to actively reach out and provide greater support to students from humbler backgrounds,

22. A few months ago, MOE introduced the UPLIFT Scholarship for Independent Schools to help students from lower-income families. Beyond covering expenses such as school fees, text books, school meals, it also provides out-of-pocket expenses, which the student can use for various enrichment programmes, CCA equipment, student-initiated projects, etc. This removes affordability as an impediment for students from lower-income families to attend Independent Schools.

23. The inspiration of the UPLIFT scholarship actually came from RI's Raffles Scholarship, which is funded by donors and members of the alumni. Some of you are here today, and MOE would like to thank you for this inspiration. As of 15 June this year, we have awarded a total of 399 UPLIFT scholarships. Of these, a quarter were awarded to RI students, benefitting 27 Year 1 to 4 students and 73 Year 5 and 6 students.

24. Beyond this, RI has also taken active steps to keep its doors open to students from all backgrounds. Principal Frederick Yeo understands this fully. Having been the principal of CREST Secondary School before his current posting, he is pushing UPLIFT with all his effort and sincerity.

25. So over the past two years, RI has made a concerted effort to reach out to students and teachers from primary schools in the heartlands. During the briefings, the school assures students and parents that RI is committed to fostering an inclusive learning environment, and allays any concerns that students from neighbourhood schools will feel out of place. Many of these students have joined RI. Hence, RI's 2019 Sec 1 intake cohort came from 102 primary schools, compared to 82 in 2016. And I think the number will increase, partly because MOE has also continued to invest in neighbourhood schools, and standards are getting better and better.

26. Besides UPLIFT, RI is also making a deliberate effort to help secondary students widen their circle of friends. One example is the Raffles Boarding Programme, which was implemented in 2016. Under the Programme, students from Guangyang Secondary, Peirce Secondary, Whitley Secondary and RI will live together for seven weeks and take part in various activities together.

27. I hear that the students have a great time learning to be independent, doing their own laundry, ironing their clothes and cleaning their own rooms. RI is looking to extend this opportunity to more schools within the south zone clusters in the coming years.

CONCLUSION

28. Let me conclude. As an institute for learning, what RI stood for and continues to stand for is not just relevant to education, but to society. Striving for excellence and meritocracy are values and principles which our society holds dear, and were critical at a time when we were poor, when our nation had yet to be formed, and when societal cohesion was weak.

29. Today, as we embark on a new phase of nation building, new challenges and imperatives have come to the fore. Sometimes, old principles get questioned, and uncertainties and self-doubt can creep in, as is happening in many societies around the world today.

30. But I do not believe that our past principles have become obsolete or irrelevant. If we understand how inequality is part of the consequence of our success in improving lives, ensure a broad recognition of different talents, and do our utmost to uplift weaker members of our society – we can continue to reward and recognise excellence, while being compassionate and inclusive.

31. This will not happen automatically, and it will require all of us – the Government, schools, employers, individuals, parents and students – to play our part. And to the students of RI, many of whom are here today – being able to study in a school like RI is a true privilege. You have been given so much, and I wish that you pass it on to those who are less fortunate than you when you have a chance. Reach out and give back to society in whatever capacity you may be in.

32. If we can achieve these, then I am confident that meritocracy will serve us well for another generation, and I look forward to RI continuing to be that shining beacon, leading and uniting our society for the future.

33. Auspicious Melioris Aevi. Thank you.

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Last updated: 27 Jul 2019

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