

ACCESS

**SOCIAL MOBILITY
PERCEPTION SURVEY
REPORT 2022**



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Executive Summary

Access Singapore ran a Social Mobility Perception Survey from June 11 to July 11 2021, to examine perceptions of social mobility among members of the public based on their lived experiences. We received a total of 201 responses throughout the poll.

This poll was launched on OPPi, an AI-powered crowdsourcing platform with proprietary analytic and statistical capabilities and involved a series of demographic questions and statements to which participants could respond, including topics on scholarships, schools and employers.

The survey revealed a widening class divide: the privileged being able to move ahead far faster than others, thereby aggravating class divisions in Singapore. We also observed strong differing opinions between different socioeconomic classes on topics ranging from the Direct School Admission exercise to government scholarships.

With the survey findings, Access calls for a whole-of-society approach towards pursuing the objective of social mobility, with particular emphasis on education and public service policies.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the implications of inequalities that exist in our society today. Throughout the pandemic, the harsh realities experienced by disadvantaged groups have been well-documented and laid bare for all to see. As a result, discussions on unequal access to opportunity have re-emerged. Tackling these long-standing inequalities is at the core of Access's work as an organisation founded to promote social mobility in Singapore.

Since 2019, Access has been running career exposure programmes for students from less privileged backgrounds. Through these programmes, we begin to close opportunity and social network gaps for students in Singapore. One individual at a time, we hope that all young Singaporeans will have the opportunities they need to excel and achieve their dreams.

Following this, Access sought to better understand the remaining gaps that hinder social mobility. To do so, we wanted to understand Singaporeans' sentiments towards social mobility across different aspects of life, from getting ahead in Singapore to schools and scholarships. We hope that the thoughts garnered through our survey would illuminate the lingering gaps on the ground, and inform future initiatives to better bridge these gaps.

The survey reviews public perception and sentiments on the state of social mobility in Singapore. It examines responses to 20 statements about social mobility – including issues such as career success, the relevance of education, and the impact of scholarships.

Our Perspectives

Education and Public Sector

In this section, we provide our perspectives on the Primary One Registration Exercise (Phase 2A), Direct School Admission policy, Public Service Commission Scholarships as well as a proposal to set up a Social Mobility Commission in Singapore.

Primary One Registration Exercise

The Ministry of Education announced in September 2021 that Phases 2A1 and 2A2 will be combined into a single Phase 2A. This entails several changes, with Phase 2A providing priority for children;

- whose parent or sibling is a former student of the primary school, including those who have joined the alumni association of the primary school as a member
- whose parent is a member of the School Advisory or Management Committee
- whose parent is a staff member of the primary school
- were from the MOE Kindergarten (MK) under the purview of and located within the primary school

This move frees up more slots for children without prior parental affiliation to enter schools nearer to their homes in subsequent phases. However, children whose parents hold prior affiliation to these schools continue to be privileged for admission. Hence, an 'inheritance' effect – where a select group of children inherit a place in the school because of parental alumni affiliation – persists. Compared to the other priority phases, the justification for giving priority to those whose parents are alumni is less evident. Perhaps some justification may be found where the parent has expended effort in serving the school (such as an active School Advisory Committee member, Parents Support Group member or staff member). However, where such effort is absent (for example, where the parent is merely a member of the alumni association, without actively contributing to its activities), this rationale struggles to apply. Similarly, justification for why a sibling who is a past student of the school should warrant privileged admission for the child is likewise less evident.

The Phase 2A policy, therefore, ensures preferential access to brand-name primary schools is passed down from parent to child for some, while others who lack familial affiliation to these schools are penalised through no fault of their own. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Ministry of Education in levelling-up all schools, 67% of respondents in our survey still disagreed with the statement that "every school is a good school". The public still perceives a divergence in the quality of education that children receive in different schools, with our respondents citing that some schools offer specialised programmes and have more diversified sources of funding. Primary One registration data also supports this – primary schools offering the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) are persistently excessively oversubscribed in Phase 2C, with the phase open to all applicants (Figure 1).

School	2021 Phase 2C Oversubscription %	2020 Phase 2C Oversubscription %
Anglo-Chinese Primary School	160%	177%
Catholic High School (Primary)	229%	224%
Henry Park Primary School	333%	280%
Nan Hua Primary School	671%	523%
Nanyang Primary School	305%	390%
Raffles Girls' School (Primary)	120%	229%
Rosyth Primary School	459%	470%
St. Hilda's Primary School	590%	359%
Tao Nan Primary School	209%	357%

Figure 1: Percentage of Oversubscription for available places at GEP Primary Schools, during Phase 2C (Credit: sgschooling.com)

1- Extracted from "Changes to the Primary 1 (P1) Registration Framework". MOE, 19 May 2022. Accessed at <https://www.moe.gov.sg/primary/p1-registration/changes-to-p1-registration?pt=2A>

The overwhelming popularity of GEP schools corroborates the results of our survey, strongly suggesting that parents do believe certain schools offer a better education for their children, and hence a better start in life.

Several respondents also mentioned that attending prestigious primary schools has a lasting advantage in secondary school and beyond. One respondent commented that alumni from the same brand-name primary school continue to maintain close ties, even at the workplace.

Therefore, giving a select pool of children an 'inherited' placement in such schools erodes the fundamental tenet of giving equal opportunity for all children to receive what is perceived to be a better educational opportunity. This inequality may intersect with other socioeconomic divisions wherein the more well-off children enjoy their 'inherited' placement, while the disadvantaged children are denied placement in these schools even in Phase 2C. Where this is the case, an early opportunity for disadvantaged children to match up to their more advantaged peers evaporates. MOE has added 20 more slots to be made available in Phase 2C, given the changes to Phase 2A. However, the extent to which 20 more slots will adequately alleviate oversubscriptions of two to six times the school's available Primary One places is one to watch.

As such, we believe that for schools offering the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) or Special Assistance Programme (SAP) schemes, admissions based on parental or sibling affiliations under Phase 2A should be removed. This ensures a more just admissions process, ensuring a diversity of children are equitably considered for admission. By doing so, those without any affiliation advantage are given a much better chance to receive this early opportunity to match up to their better-off peers, narrowing the class divide.

Direct School Admission (DSA)

The Direct School Admission (DSA) policy also contributes toward giving more advantaged students additional opportunities for admission to choice institutions. In brief, the DSA policy allows Primary Six students to be considered for admission to secondary schools based on their talent in sports, CCAs and specific academic areas.

However, it is often the case that exemplary talent in these areas correlates with a more advantaged background. Towards the statement "Children from wealthier families benefit more from the Direct School Admissions scheme as compared to children from low-income families", many of the 77% of respondents who agreed shared the sentiment that children from better-off families generally possess better resources, external support and greater availability of time. Several also remarked that better-off children were more likely to possess the 'curiosity' to engage in non-academic pursuits. Therefore, they are more able to hone their talents. By contrast, disadvantaged students typically rely largely on school-provided resources and may have to juggle additional responsibilities in the family. Hence, pitting more advantaged and less advantaged students against each other will likely see disadvantaged students struggle to secure DSA offers to choice schools.

Access believes that the DSA scheme should be fundamentally redesigned to ensure a fairer playing field for all, failing which it may need to be considered for removal due to potential longer-term implications on social mobility.

2- Extracted from "Direct School Admission for secondary schools (DSA-Sec)", MOE, 01 June 2022. Accessed at <https://www.moe.gov.sg/secondary/dsa>

Public Service Commission (PSC) Scholarships

Respondents from our survey felt that the award of government scholarships has been increasingly unequal, especially PSC scholarships where the majority of scholars traditionally hail from brand-name schools.

While the PSC is increasingly making changes in the right direction, more can be done. We are concerned that future cohorts of leaders may not be sufficiently diverse to understand and represent the needs of all segments of our society. The Public Service Commission has embarked on efforts to adopt alternative assessments such as the Game-Based Assessment, with a commitment to seek diversity in the civil service at all levels. However, these initiatives may magnify, rather than neutralise, class advantages. Parents with better socioeconomic statuses can leverage their wealth and social status to afford better developmental opportunities for their children, including the transfer of 'cultural capital' by acclimatising them in manners of speech, relating to authority figures, and understanding subjects like art and music. These implicit qualities remain less accessible to parents and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, making it hard for them to compete, even in alternative assessments.

Many students from various segments of society are interested in pursuing public service careers, but also perceive that those from brand-name schools are ahead of them from the get-go. Therefore many of them, capable as they may be, are deterred from even trying to apply for scholarships, resigned to the belief that they will not receive them in any case. We must empower students from disadvantaged backgrounds to believe that they too can become leaders in the public sector if they are capable and work hard. We can do more to establish a more even playing field catering to potential applicants from diverse backgrounds in the scholarship selection process. Additionally, more support programmes such as public service experiential learning experiences must be given to heartland schools to level the playing field, or at least narrow the opportunity gap.

Social Mobility Commission

We propose the setting up of an independent Social Mobility Commission to monitor and promote social mobility in Singapore. The Government can study and borrow elements of similar endeavours in other countries, such as the British iteration of a Social Mobility Commission that covers a broad range of topics in its scrutiny of social mobility in the United Kingdom. This includes reviewing the British Civil Service's efforts at workforce diversity and mobility, considering present internal challenges to social mobility, and putting forth whole-of-society recommendations.

Singapore's version of the Social Mobility Commission should be similarly independent and empowered to uncover gaps and propose solutions to social mobility issues and challenges. Its work can also include looking at diversity in the public service and potential closed inner circles up to the highest echelons of government administration. However, beyond proposing recommendations, the Singapore Social Mobility Commission should also be empowered as an advisory body for multi-agency coordination between various agencies to ensure comprehensive solutions are ideated and effectively implemented. It will also provide policymakers with grassroots-level information to validate policy effectiveness and further calibrate devised solutions.

We envisage this proposed Social Mobility Commission to work in close collaboration with four ministries working on social mobility in particular: the Ministry of Social and Family Development; the Ministry of Finance; the Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth; and the Ministry of Education. This helps to ensure a holistic and systematic redress of social mobility in Singapore.

Employers

Employers also play a critical role in enabling social mobility. We urge employers to do more to ensure a diverse workforce and provide more opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to prove their abilities in the workforce. As seen from our survey findings, disadvantaged individuals have encountered greater difficulty entering sectors such as Law and Technology. Practically, employers should consider alternative recruitment strategies, like name-blind recruitment to reduce biases towards individuals that hail from brand-name institutions or with well-connected backgrounds.

Community

In Singapore, the narrative around "success" is often framed and highly celebrated in the context of the exceptional few. This view of success is not just myopic but severely constrains society's markers of success, and reiterates success as being unattainable for the common folk. We hope Singaporeans will broaden their concept of success. We each define our own successes, and it should not be up to society to determine what success is such or limit the career paths and factors that make one "successful".

To that end, Access has embarked on a campaign celebrating different education and career paths to show that success is possible for everyone. Termed #WeWriteOurRules, the campaign features Singaporeans from all walks of life – from personal trainers to actors and designers – and aims to showcase their stories of struggle, grit and how they are ultimately rewriting the old rules of success.

Methodology

The social mobility perception survey hosted on the OPPi web platform garnered participation from 201 individuals. Participants were asked to answer 10 demographic questions followed by a series of 20 statements to evaluate their perception of social mobility in Singapore, spanning topics on scholarships, schools and employers. The statements were developed by Access in line with the philosophy of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Some examples of statements include:

"Government scholarships should only be given to those from low or middle-income backgrounds and attending a brand-name secondary school will influence the opportunities I have in life."

"It is getting harder for children from low-to-middle income families to get ahead in Singapore based on ability alone."

Respondents were asked to indicate if they agreed, disagreed or were undecided on each statement, and were invited to elaborate on their responses when answering the statements. This allowed Access to capture each respondent's personal opinions, beyond their responses to fixed survey options.

The poll was launched on OPPi, an AI-powered crowdsourcing platform with proprietary analytic and statistical capabilities. We adopted OPPi's proprietary analytic capabilities, substantiating it with separate statistical analyses to explore the nuances in our data. The OPPi algorithm analyses all votes and determines the landscape of opinions according to the voting patterns of the poll participants. The votes and responses of the participants are anonymous.

About Access

Access is a social mobility non-profit organisation founded in January 2019 providing career exposure opportunities for disadvantaged students. We target educational disadvantages in heartland schools with a focus on educational streams which are traditionally less reached such as Normal Academic/Technical streams as well as students on Financial Assistance Schemes (FAS). Access programmes are aimed at exposing students to various career paths while connecting and building relationships between professionals and students. Access seeks to improve social mobility and address educational disadvantages in the system. By levelling the playing field, we hope that all students will have equal opportunities to excel and achieve their dreams.

About OPPi

OPPi, an AI-powered engagement tool. OPPi leverages the power of emergent or wiki surveys to help leaders gather the pulse of the people and facilitate high-quality decision-making for complex societal issues. As part of OPPi's corporate social responsibility, OPPi also helps to bring the voices of the people and marginalised communities to decision-making tables in the public sector, parliament and private sector globally.

OPPi combines quantitative and qualitative methods with advanced statistical techniques to identify opinion tribes based on respondents' views and visualise correlations between opinions and respondents. OPPi learns patterns from respondents in real-time to help leaders identify fault lines and common ground.

Snapshot of Results

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced my future opportunities in life.



2. I am confident that I can bounce back stronger from setbacks brought about by COVID-19.



3. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to give up opportunities for further education so that I can start working and earning an income earlier.



4. I do not feel respected by those richer than me.



5. Employers should do more to provide opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to get ahead in life.



6. Some sectors in Singapore are harder for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to get into (than others).



7. I am confident that I can achieve my career goals in Singapore.



8. It is getting harder for children from low-to-middle income families to get ahead in Singapore based on ability alone.



9. I know someone who can make it easier for me to secure the opportunities in which I am interested.



10. If I am not academically inclined, other pathways to success are open to me in Singapore.

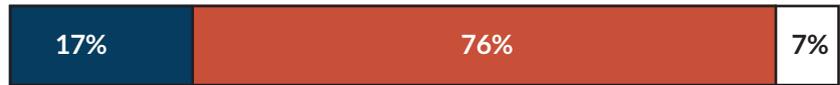


Agree
 Disagree
 Undecided

11. If I do not succeed academically before the age of 18 in Singapore, I can still be as successful in life as those who did.



12. I can count on my parents' networks to assist me in achieving my goals.



13. Children from wealthier families benefit more from the Direct School Admissions (DSA) scheme as compared to children from low-income families.



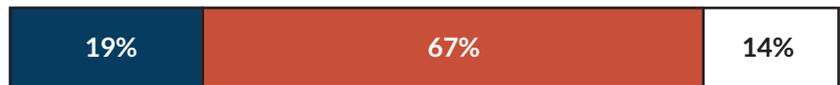
14. Government scholarships should only be given to those from low or middle-income backgrounds.



15. All socioeconomic groups (high-income, middle-income, low-income) should be proportionally represented in the pool of government scholarship recipients.



16. Every school is a good school.



17. Attending a brand-name secondary school will influence the opportunities I have in life.



18. Children should not receive priority admissions to the primary school their parents/ siblings attended.



19. My secondary school has/had provided me with higher education and career guidance which benefitted me.

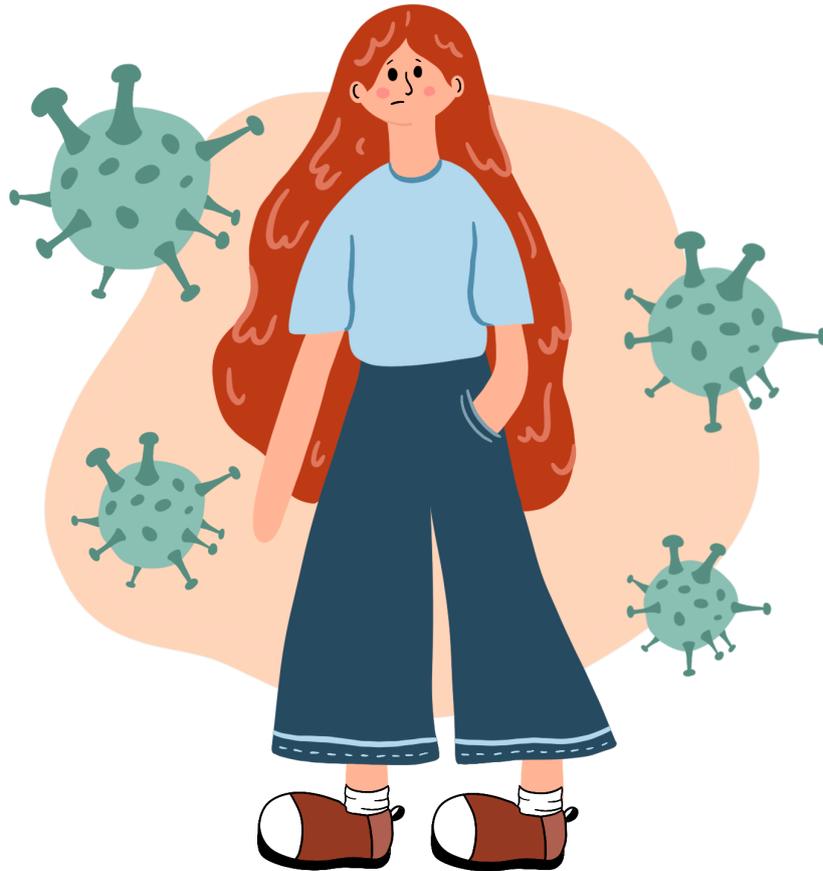


20. Attending a brand-name primary school will influence the opportunities I have in life.



Agree
 Disagree
 Undecided

COVID-19



1. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced my future opportunities in life



2. I am confident that I can bounce back stronger from setbacks brought about by COVID-19



3. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to give up opportunities for further education so that I can start working and earning an income earlier



● Agree ● Disagree ○ Undecided

COVID-19: Questions 1, 2, 3

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced my future opportunities in life.

35% of respondents agreed, 39% disagreed, and 26% were undecided.

Comments received centred around the effects of COVID-19 on employment opportunities. One respondent acknowledged that although the pandemic had caused a reduction in the number of available jobs, travel restrictions also limited foreign competition for these roles.

Another respondent expressed worry about their future earning potential, especially as employers stopped giving yearly increments and/or bonuses during the pandemic.

2. I am confident that I can bounce back stronger from setbacks brought about by COVID-19.

64% of respondents agree with this statement, 10% disagreed and 26% were undecided.

Of those who disagreed, many attributed their lack of confidence to the general loss of opportunities during the pandemic. One respondent mentioned that they feared missing out on “opportunities which [would] only come by in [their] mid- to late-twenties”, as even when the pandemic situation improves, “these levelling up tools would no longer be available”.

Another cause for concern was the rise in mental health issues due to the pandemic and the lockdowns that took place. Several respondents felt that the pandemic had hampered mental health efforts and caused “mental health recovery to be pushed back by a few years of progress in one year”. This is concerning as mental health issues take considerable time and effort to overcome and add to daily stresses when not resolved.

3. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to give up opportunities for further education so that I can start working and earning an income earlier.

10% of respondents agreed with the statement, 77% disagreed, and 13% were undecided.

Generally, those with at least an ‘O’ level qualification remained confident about their opportunities to pursue higher education despite the pandemic.

One respondent advocated for a more optimistic perspective and identified a practical opportunity “to explore career [options] instead of pursuing further education” as they observed a significant change in “quality of education”.

An inference can be drawn from these responses that some respondents might have experienced a shift in priorities due to the pandemic. This could be due to a general landscape change in the labour market as many employees left their jobs during the pandemic for various reasons. Some experienced burnout, others were headhunted by other agencies or simply desired to work in a different sector.

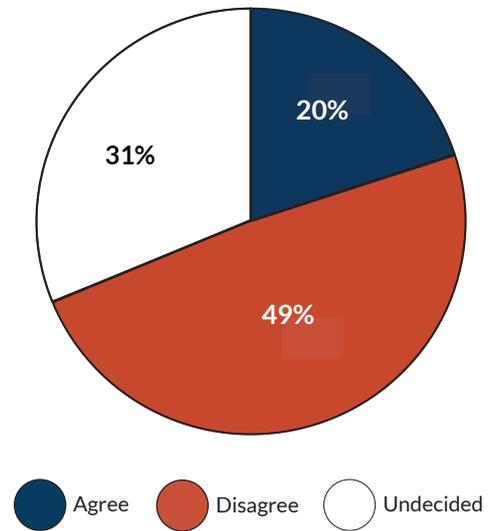
For example, the pandemic accelerated underlying trends in the labour market, such as the demand for jobs in certain fast-growing sectors like technology, innovation and finance. This is vastly different from the situation years ago. Crucially, it may have a direct influence or impact on one's available opportunities in further education or a sense of loss or perception of missed opportunities for some. This could be due to a general appreciation of the changing landscape of the labour market. For instance, many employees are choosing to leave for various reasons during this COVID-19 period, such as experiencing burnout, being headhunted or a desire to completely pivot to another sector. This is dubbed "The Great Resignation".

For example, the pandemic has accelerated underlying trends in the labour market, such as the demand for jobs in certain fast growing sectors such as technology, innovation and finance, compared with the situation just 5 years ago. This may have a direct influence or impact on one's choices of opportunities in further education and a sense of loss or a perception of missed opportunities for some.

Elitism



4. I do not feel respected by those richer than me



4. I do not feel respected by those richer than me.

20% of respondents agreed with the statement, 49% disagreed, and 31% were undecided.

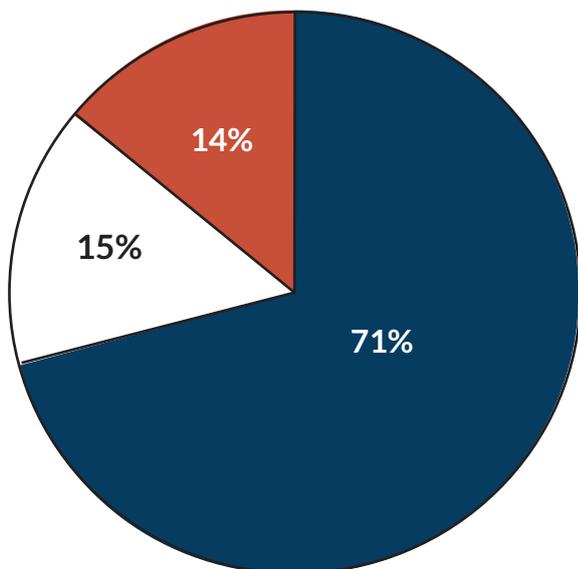
A significant proportion of the respondents indicated that there is no discrimination between wealth. However, more needs to be done to understand privilege beyond wealth.

As observed by one participant, privilege does not only come from socioeconomic status (SES). Privilege, and its ensuing attitude, also comes from one's social network, social standing, family background and even alumni association.

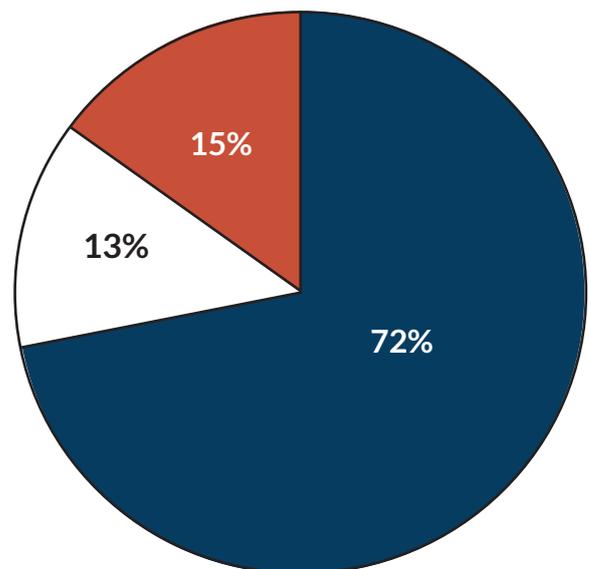
Employers



5. Employers should do more to provide opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to get ahead in life



6. Some sectors in Singapore are harder for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to get into



● Agree ● Disagree ● Undecided

Employers: Questions 5, 6

5. Employers should do more to provide opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to get ahead in life.

71% of respondents agreed with the statement, 14% disagreed, and 15% were undecided.

Most respondents who agreed with the statement felt that employers should be responsible for any opportunity disparity. Those who disagreed opined that it should be the job of the government to aid individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Several comments centred on the ambiguous definition of “disadvantaged”, and respondents pointed out that it might be too broad. Without enough clarity, policymakers that try to level the playing field may end up creating divides instead.

Those who agreed with the statement argued that employers should indeed take into consideration someone’s background and create more routes for fairer recruitment. More importantly, respondents were concerned about the types of opportunities created for less privileged workers. One respondent raised a particularly salient point that “it’s not about token representation, [but] it’s ensuring the system picks out all able and competent people”.

Indeed, there is a limit to what employers can do to ensure fairer employment, as many factors affecting employability are determined before a worker enters the labour market. However, there is certainly still room for employers to further refine their recruitment process.

For instance, employers can encourage job candidates to demonstrate their potential without relying solely on paper qualifications. The Civil Service in the United Kingdom is another example, with ‘name-blind’ recruitment adopted across the service. By removing the candidate’s name and other personal information, such as their nationality or the university they attended, applicants are judged based on merit and not based on their background, race or gender.

6. Some sectors in Singapore are harder for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to get into (than others).

If you agree, do share the sectors that you think are harder for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get into.



An overwhelming majority of respondents (72%) agreed with the statement, 15% of participants disagreed and 13% were undecided.

Respondents perceive Law, Medicine, and Finance to be the three sectors with the highest barriers for disadvantaged individuals to enter.

Respondents explained that these sectors typically require students to obtain expensive specialised degrees, with insufficient scholarships to help offset this financial burden. Unlike in the Theatre or Hospitality sectors, one cannot be self-taught in Law or Medicine, no matter how motivated or resourceful one might be. The necessity for professional qualifications in these fields limits their accessibility to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who typically struggle to afford the requisite education. Many respondents also lamented that comprehensive preparation was needed to even qualify for a chance to earn these qualifications at universities. Unfortunately, many disadvantaged students simply cannot allocate the resources – financial or otherwise – which are necessary to achieve this level of preparation.

More worryingly, a significant majority of respondents believed that “connections” or social networks were key to a successful start in the aforementioned three sectors. Armed with the right “connections”, individuals from more affluent backgrounds seemed to stand a better chance of securing important internships and jobs at prestigious or top organisations. Similar sentiments were also seen in comments about Art, the Public Service, and Technology sectors, as these fields also generally require financial stability and strong academic performance from individuals.

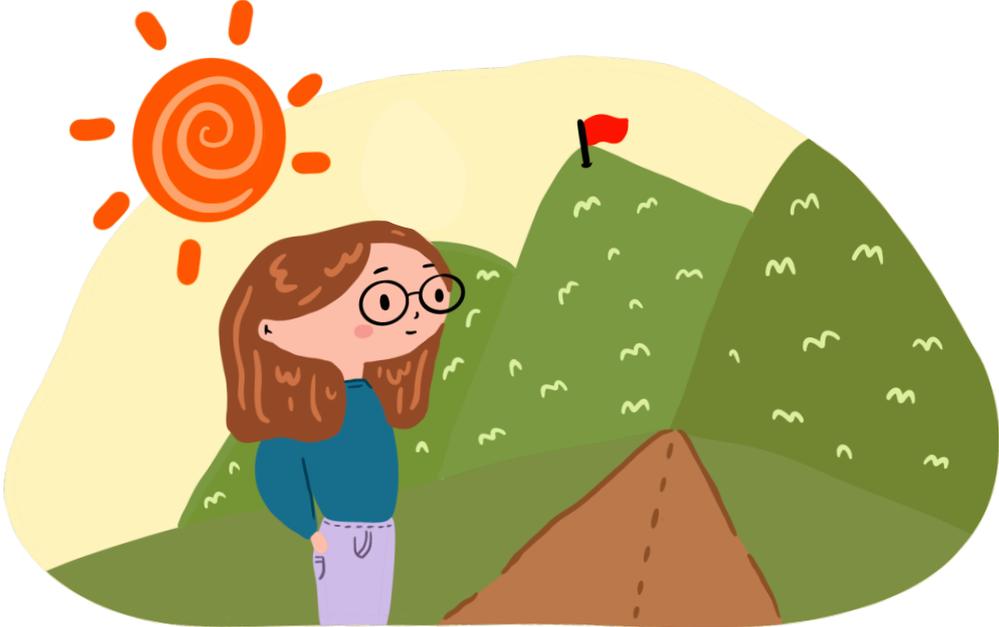
In these instances, initial privilege sets a chain of events in motion. One begins with the right connections and affluence to undergo the necessary but costly preparation to secure a spot in a prestigious school. Given their resources and the right environment, this individual then has a higher chance of performing well academically, which then enables them to obtain the required degree and skills to work in specialised fields. Hence, to many, disadvantage begins much earlier in their lives and before the point of employment.

It is thus essential to take steps to level the playing field. More government support (financial aid or otherwise) can be given to financially disadvantaged families to allow students to attend enrichment lessons that are often only accessible by more financially affluent families. Moreover, for the disadvantaged students who do make the cut to undertake a degree in a highly specialised but expensive field, the government should offer scholarships to students who are unable to afford the costly tuition fees. Additionally, all schools should offer comprehensive work attachment or internship opportunities to allow students from all walks of life to gain valuable working experience and build invaluable industry connections and networks.

In general, most respondents pointed to Dentistry, Banking, Finance, Law, Academia, Politics and Governance, Medicine, Psychologists, Public Service, Technology, Business, Accounting, and Engineering, as professions that generally require higher education qualifications that are financially prohibitive to obtain for many in Singapore. Furthermore, those who do not make the cut to pursue these selected degrees in Singapore but are from affluent families have the added option of pursuing the course overseas, which may have lower entry requirements but is more costly.

However, there were some interesting responses when it came to the Arts, Culture and Sports sectors in Singapore. Respondents attributed it to the fact that these were jobs that were rarely pursued in Singapore, and would hence require individuals to obtain qualifications overseas to practise these desired fields. Other answers included Architecture, Teaching and Biomedicine. What was surprising was that they included careers such as Retail, Hospitality and Engineering for the physically disabled as a result of safety concerns.

Getting Ahead in Singapore



7. I am confident that I can achieve my career goals in Singapore



8. It is getting harder for children from low- and middle-income families to get ahead in Singapore based on ability alone



9. I know someone who can make it easier for me to secure the opportunities in which I am interested in



10. If I am not academically inclined, other pathways to success are open to me in Singapore



11. If I do not succeed academically before the age of 18 in Singapore, I can still be as successful in life as those who did



Agree
 Disagree
 Undecided

Getting Ahead in Singapore: Questions 7, 8, 9, 10, 11

7. I am confident that I can achieve my career goals in Singapore.

55% of respondents agreed with the statement, 18% disagreed, and 26% were undecided.

Even as more than half of the respondents were confident about achieving their goals in Singapore, nearly 2 in 5 remained sceptical about their opportunities in the country. One respondent commented that “options [were] too narrow”, thereby forcing many into similar corporate jobs. Another respondent added that they “still want to pursue music, but [that is limited by] how progressive Singapore can be”. This anecdote is a cold reflection of Singapore’s small domestic market, which limits the chances for individuals to embark on “less-travelled paths” and carve out successes in less conventional fields.

One respondent, in particular, lamented that they “were not smart enough, and lacked the connections to truly succeed”. This shows that meritocracy and social networking are necessary to achieve one’s goals in Singapore. If there is merit to this anecdote, then this implies that structural disadvantages exist as some may be born without the “prerequisites for success”. In other words, there seems to be a tacit view among some respondents that one’s success (or lack thereof) is already predetermined by a “birth lottery”.

8. It is getting harder for children from low -and middle-income families to get ahead in Singapore based on ability alone.

A majority of respondents (72%) agreed with the statement, 15% disagreed, and 13% were undecided.

Generally, respondents agreed that children from higher-income families had access to more resources that allow them to succeed in life than children from low-to-middle income families. Many mentioned that extra-curricular tuition significantly impacts the development of a child’s ability, which low-to-middle income families struggle to provide. For example, one respondent expressed their frustration that “tuition needs money, but low-income families lack money to even put food on the table.” This highlights how children from low-income families may not even be in a position to think about growing into their potential when daily survival is top of mind. Even capable, bright, but disadvantaged youths may not have access to additional resources that support their development, unlike their better-off peers.

Moreover, many respondents believed that low-to-middle income families lacked connections and reliable networks. One respondent shared that “even if a child from a low-to-middle income family had the ability, the opportunities [would still be] given to those who are well-connected”.

Though many focused on the unfair access to resources and opportunities that children from low-to-middle income families struggle with, some brought up the daily obstacles that they faced as well. For instance, a respondent expressed that “many children from low-to-middle income families simply do not have conducive learning environments”. Another respondent highlighted that “some have financial worries to deal with”.

This demonstrates that even if low and middle-income families were to be provided with resources and opportunities, it would be insufficient as this profile of students struggles with a multitude of disadvantages that are not simply remedied by the provision of resources and opportunities. Crucially, their circumstances limit their ability to fully utilise such provisions.

9. I know someone who can make it easier for me to secure the opportunities in which I am interested.

49% of respondents agreed with the statement, 37% disagreed, and 14% were undecided.

Opinions regarding this statement were diverse. For instance, one participant shared that they “had many safety nets because of [their] family background - so, there [would always be] plenty of opportunities”. Another respondent explained that they “built [their] connections by shamelessly reaching out to people”.

From this, we see that some individuals have at least some sort of network that they can tap onto for opportunities. However, some feel otherwise. One participant mentioned that “[they] have not met anyone making it easier for [them] to secure the opportunities [they are] interested in”.

The diversity of perspectives concerning opportunities could have various root causes which might have little to do with socioeconomic statuses, such as one’s personality and environment.

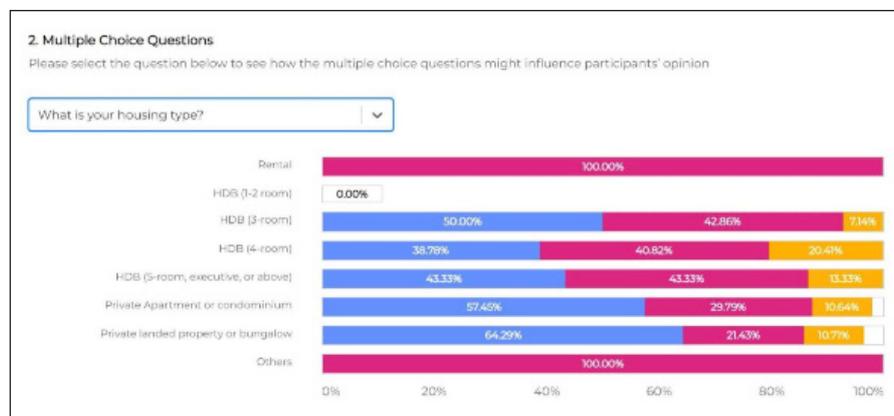


Figure 2: Percentage of Respondents who agreed (blue), disagreed (purple) and are undecided (yellow) with the statement “I know someone who can make it easier for me to secure the opportunities in which I am interested,” by housing type.

As seen in Figure 2 above, there is a positive relationship between household type and one’s reliable network. Wealthier families have a greater advantage in securing opportunities for themselves. Thus, we can deduce that SES may be reproduced and maintained within each respective level only (high, middle, low). This is not ideal and efforts should be made to resolve this. One respondent remarked that “opportunities at the bottom of a top school are scarce”. More worryingly, the same respondent also felt that “someone better [would] get [such opportunities] even if [they] asked”.

One might argue that there ought to be renewed concern about groupthink, as a closed circle of “advantaged” and “brand-names” cannot produce inclusive policies on their own. Thus, we need a concerted effort to ensure diversity and equitable approaches to attract the best talent from diverse backgrounds.

10. If I am not academically inclined, other pathways to success are open to me in Singapore.

61% of respondents agreed with the statement, 25% disagreed, and 14% were undecided.

Sentiments from this pool of respondents acknowledged the conditionalities that are tied to achieving success through a less-trodden path. With success traditionally associated with brand-name careers including “law, science, and engineering” and their related educational fields, respondents were concerned about the sustainability of careers which require less academic success such as the performing arts, fitness training, or gig work. Even as such alternative pathways exist, respondents were troubled by their general poor perception and association with low-income status. Such niche careers as the culinary arts or handicrafts are perceived to have a small market in Singapore, and income sustainability thus becomes a major concern. Two noteworthy comments highlighted the skewed prioritisation of academics which leads to poor career-related information, exposure and guidance. Without fair and comprehensive guidance, life pathways may become overly one-dimensional.

Among respondents that disagreed, the majority raised objections by citing their varying definitions of success. To them, success could be closely associated with elitism and society’s standards of success (i.e a good-paying job from a reputable company) which could be a reason for disagreeing with the statement. Given these sentiments from respondents, there is a need to rethink our definitions of success at both individual and societal levels. Perhaps, we should provide more encouragement and support for individuals embarking on careers in less ventured or less ‘prestigious’ industries.

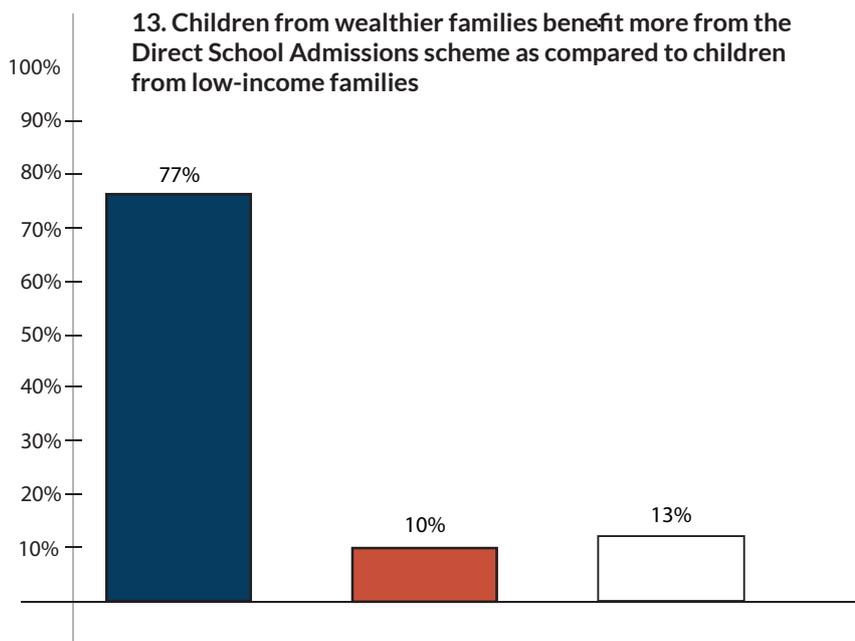
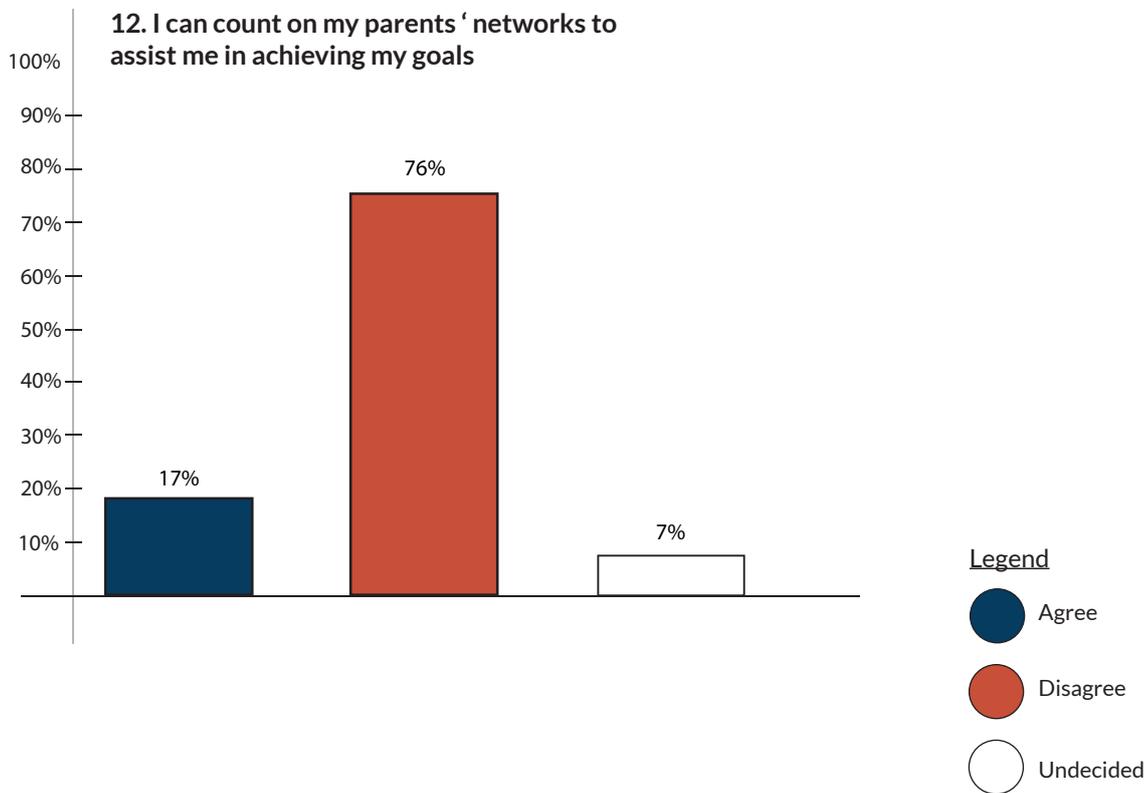
11. If I do not succeed academically before the age of 18 in Singapore, I can still be as successful in life as those who did.

74% of respondents agreed with the statement, 12% disagreed, and 14% were undecided.

While a majority agreed with the statement, these respondents were also less optimistic and more conscious of the realities of current socioeconomic and societal conditions necessary to become successful. Many respondents highlighted how success would take a long time, with one respondent sharing that “tremendous hard work” is needed. Additionally, respondents admit that achieving success without “society’s ideal academic qualifications” is itself a “rare exception” that is hard to achieve realistically. Notably, most respondents exhibit an ingrained understanding and perception that our education system has identified the best and the brightest through academic success since young, and how these individuals are primed for success in their later years when they embark on their career journey. Conversely, if one were to fall short of such academic excellence at a young age, respondents expressed a bleak perception of achieving success later in life.

The results reveal that academic success is still traditionally associated with having a smooth-sailing path toward building one’s career and life. While this mindset is a result of Singapore’s examination-oriented education system, a possible bottom-up solution is to ‘denaturalise’ academic excellence as the path toward achieving success. The fear of making mistakes tends to manifest into a fear of failure. Denaturalising the association of academic excellence with success thus requires naturalising mistakes as valuable opportunities for learning and reflection.

Impact of Family Background



Impact of Family Background: Questions 12, 13

12. I can count on my parents' networks to assist me in achieving my goals.

17% of respondents agreed with the statement, 76% disagreed, and 7% were undecided.

Most respondents indicated that they were unable to rely on their parents to assist them in their career goals due to different circumstances, such as being from different generations. "My parents have no networks", "poor family, no network", and "not everyone's parents have a strong professional network" were just some of the many similar opinions from respondents. Two respondents also highlighted that their parents were "blue-collar employees" and "immigrant parents with not many social networks".

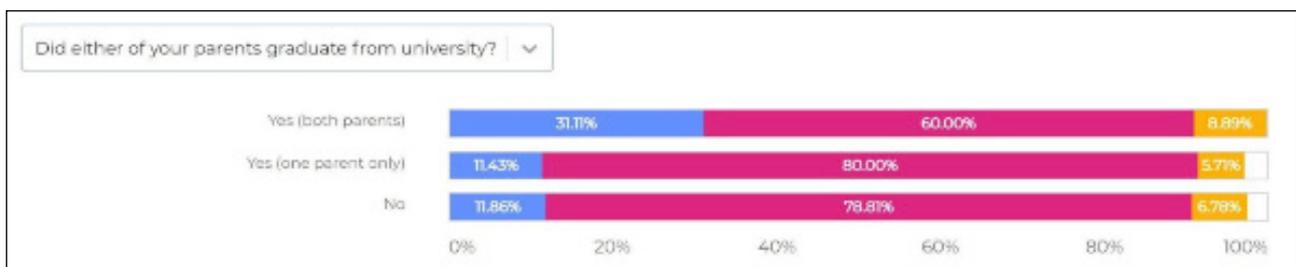


Figure 3: The percentage of respondents who agreed (blue), disagreed (purple) and were undecided (yellow) towards the statement "I can count on my parents' networks to assist me in achieving my goals.," categorised by whether either of the respondents' parents graduated from university.

However, as seen from Figure 3 above, among respondents whose parents both obtained a university degree, more were optimistic that they could count on assistance from their parents' networks to achieve their goals.

13. Children from wealthier families benefit more from the Direct School Admissions (DSA) scheme as compared to children from low-income families.

77% of respondents agreed with the statement, 10% disagreed, and 13% were undecided.

Most respondents agreed that wealth creates an advantage in skill- or talent-based selection systems. Notably, one respondent noted that "wealthier families have the monetary advantage to hone the child's gifts and talents, through the support of enrichment classes". This, however, is not always the case for low-income families, and thus their children may lack "exposure" or the "time needed to cultivate skills". Many respondents also agreed that factors such as "equipment" and even the child's "curiosity" for a certain sport or activity are also dependent on a family's financial status.

From the above, the positive effects of a stable and supportive home environment for a student from a relatively well-to-do household cannot be overlooked.

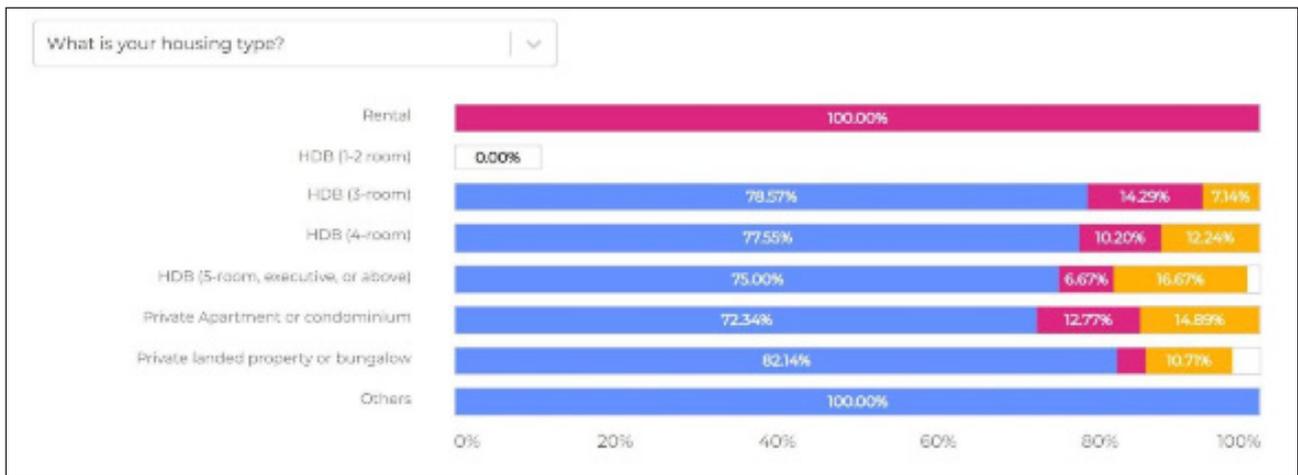


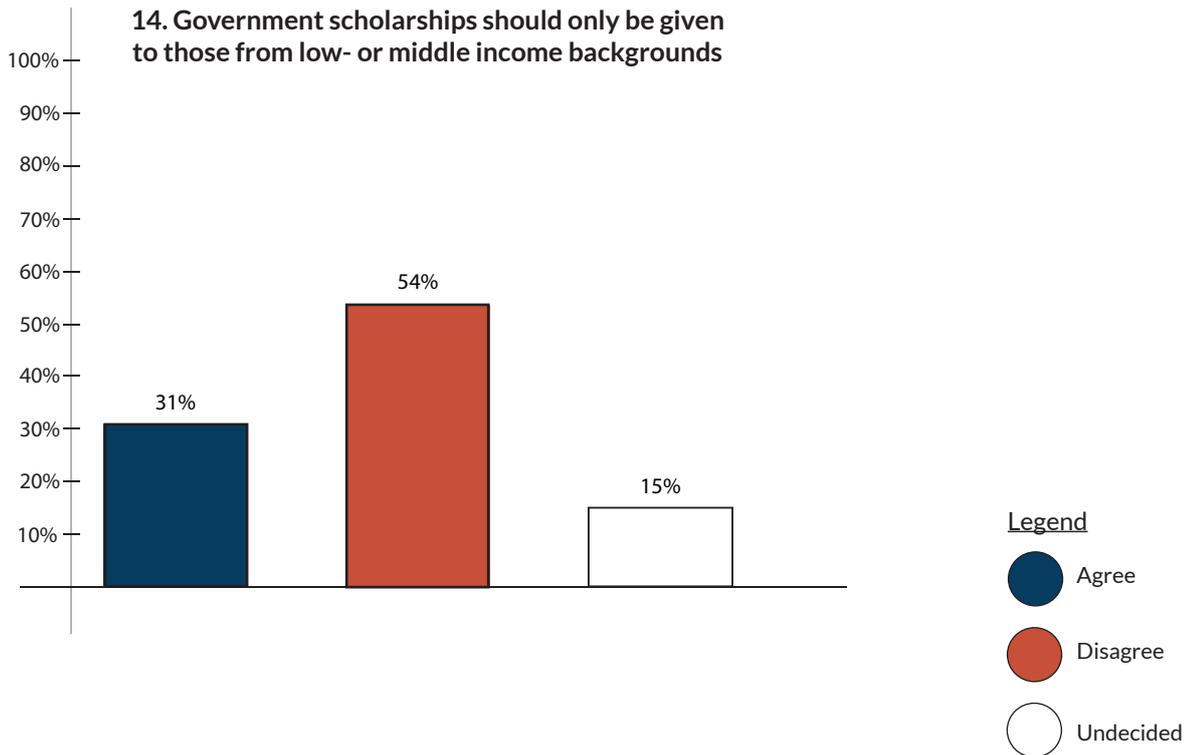
Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who disagreed (blue), agreed (purple) and were undecided (yellow) towards the statement "Children from wealthier families benefit more from the Direct School Admissions (DSA) scheme as compared to children from low-income families.", sorted by their housing type.

We also observed a negative relationship between housing type and agreement with the statement, as seen in the figure above. Using housing type as an indicator of a family's financial status, respondents from wealthier households were less likely to agree that wealth aids in DSA. This may represent the differing opinions between groups from different socioeconomic statuses (SES) or a lack of awareness by families of higher SES who are in a position of advantage.

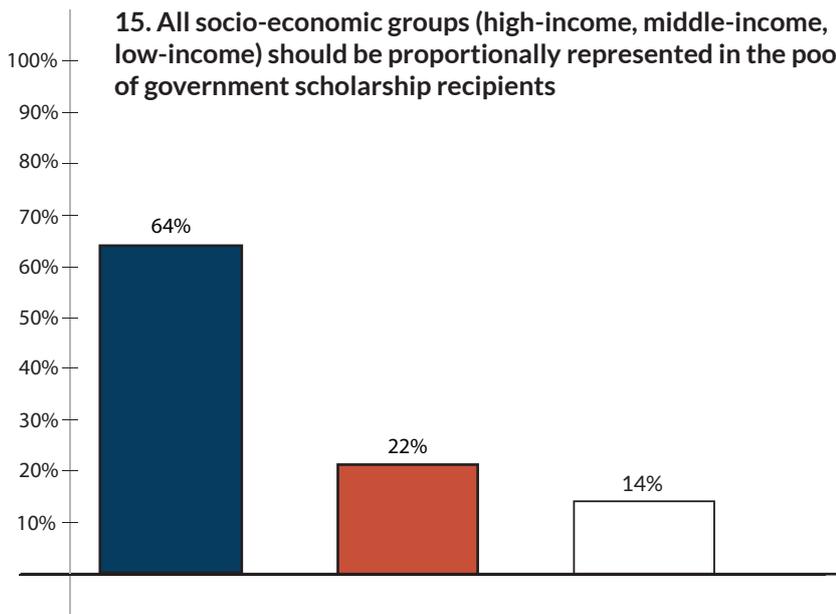
On another note, perhaps it is not enough for a DSA applicant to have skills in an activity. One response was that "schools do not just look out for skills, [as] they also look at potential and character".

Scholarships

14. Government scholarships should only be given to those from low- or middle income backgrounds



15. All socio-economic groups (high-income, middle-income, low-income) should be proportionally represented in the pool of government scholarship recipients



Scholarships: Questions 14,15

14. Government scholarships should only be given to those from low- or middle-income backgrounds.

31% of respondents agreed with the statement, 54% disagreed, and 15% were undecided.

Some respondents were supportive of giving scholarships to those who come from low- or middle-income backgrounds.

These respondents believe that individuals from high-income backgrounds do not require benefits (monetary or non-monetary) that come with a government scholarship. Moreover, respondents felt that scholarships should uplift those from lower or middle SES backgrounds.

Another key insight from respondents was that meritocracy remains highly prioritised. Meritocracy and equality however appear to have been applied differently by respondents to justify their arguments. One group saw meritocracy as decoupled from socioeconomic status, arguing that a deserving candidate should not be denied a scholarship despite possessing the financial means to self-finance their university education. The other group saw scholarships as a means to pursue meritocracy on the socioeconomic front, where students from low or middle-income groups would be offered equal opportunities to receive a university education.

Hence, their preconceived notions about value systems could have played a factor and affected their perceptions of the scholarship system. We also found it challenging to ascertain the motivations behind respondents' positions. Some respondents also did not support the idea of giving scholarships exclusively to those from lower or middle-income backgrounds as it contradicts the *raison d'être* of a meritocratic Singapore society. There was a general sentiment that government scholarships "should be given to whoever works hard for it and deserves it". By the principally unbiased nature of selection, a wide range of deserving recipients should be expected.

Possible recommendations to address this can include an enhanced focus on pushing for further diversification, increased transparency for government scholarships' selection process and government support for less traditional career paths. We hope that these efforts can help enlarge the pool of potential scholarship recipients.

15. All socioeconomic groups (high-income, middle-income, low-income) should be proportionally represented in the pool of government scholarship recipients.

64% of respondents agreed with the statement, 22% disagreed, and 14% were undecided.

We observed a slight difference in responses between respondents who attended brand-name schools and respondents who did not. A larger proportion of respondents who had not attended brand-name schools agreed with the statement (69%), compared to those who did (31%).

A more significant trend is observed in the difference in responses based on the type of housing respondents reside in. As we moved from respondents residing in 3-room HDBs (Singapore's public housing) up to those in private apartments, we observed a decreasing proportion of respondents who agreed: from 71% residing in 3-room HDBs to 55% residing in private apartments or condominiums. 64% of respondents who agreed resided in private property.

Interestingly, there was little difference in the responses between respondents who applied for financial aid and those who did not. Of those who did apply for financial aid, 60% agreed with the statement and of those who did not apply for financial aid, 64% agreed.

Four respondents stated their reason for agreeing was because those of lower SES needed financial aid more, with one respondent questioning "Why should rich people get a scholarship when they already have the money?". Another respondent considered the long-term consequences of having a disproportionately rich pool of scholars, stating that we should "make sure our future leaders address the needs of lower-income groups", and there should not be "disproportionate representation for those who have less power." Six respondents stated their reason for disagreeing was the fact that scholarships should be given out based on merit since scholarships function to "look for talent". Among this group, one shared their concerns over tokenism, stating that the government should "select for ability and outlook rather than token measures for equality's sake", while another stated that "we cannot cap the top while trying to raise the bottom".

The split between the respondents who agreed or disagreed seems to be due to different viewpoints on the primary function of scholarships. If an individual believes that scholarships are meant to provide financial aid, they will agree with the statement as those of lower SES need financial aid more. On the other hand, if one believes that scholarships are predominantly meant for identifying and developing talent, they are more likely to disagree with the statement and believe that they should be given out based on merit.

Although the proportion of respondents who disagreed with the statement (22%) was considerably smaller than those who agreed (64%), more comments were supporting the former. This could imply that those who believed in the nurturing aspect of scholarships were more certain of their decision than those who did not.

There were 2 comments on the feasibility of a policy that represents all socioeconomic groups proportionately. One respondent wondered "how [one would] enforce that system", while another stated that it was "unclear how well this [could] be implemented without negative consequences". From a practical standpoint, there are significant barriers to a socioeconomically tiered scholarship system. Perhaps these respondents could be concerned about having to introduce a household income threshold and the public opinion that comes with it.

Common policy suggestions raised by respondents centred around the need to diversify the scholarship selection process. One suggestion was to "consider success under disadvantaged background as a merit", and another was to introduce "some form of diversity or quota". Yet another suggested diversifying the amount of money received in the scholarship, where "low-income students should receive disproportionately more government scholarship money".

Schools



16. Every school is a good school



17. Attending a brand-name secondary school will influence the opportunities I have in life



18. Children should not receive priority admissions to the primary school their parents/siblings attended



19. My secondary school has/had provided me with higher education and career guidance which benefitted me



20. Attending a brand-name primary school will influence the opportunities I have in life



 Agree  Disagree  Undecided

Schools: Question 16, 17, 18, 19, 20

16. Every school is a good school.

19% of respondents agreed with the statement, 67% disagreed, and 14% were undecided.

Multiple comments expressed complete disagreement with the statement. There was also a significant number of comments that pointed out the difficulty and ambiguity surrounding the definition of 'good', as there was no clear definition of a 'good school'. Nevertheless, most comments agreed that some are better than others, even if all offer a decent education. Respondents believed that there is an indisputable difference in the quality of education provided among schools, regardless of whether all schools are good or not.

A few reasons have been raised in support of this view. One popular explanation relies on the difference in quality, variety of specialised programmes, and resources among schools. This is mainly due to the difference in funding that schools receive, with top schools balancing a diversified funding portfolio in addition to government funding. As highlighted in one comment, "better quality schools generally have greater funding and autonomy". Consequently, these schools have the resources and flexibility to offer more programmes.

Another reason surfaced by respondents was that certain schools are better because of their culture which encourages higher levels of motivation to succeed and discipline amongst both students and teachers. Hence, this creates a divide in the quality of learning environments... One respondent further opined that "even if resources [and] teachers [were] of comparable quality, peers from better schools would still be more motivated as their teachers [would] have higher expectations."

17. Attending a brand-name secondary school will influence the opportunities I have in life.

Note: Brand-name secondary schools are schools under the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) Programme, Independent Schools, or are schools offering the Integrated Programme (IP).

78% of respondents agreed with the statement, 16% disagreed, and 6% were undecided.

An individual's educational background is considered an important factor in deciding one's career path, as it either provides more opportunities or limits one's position in life. As seen from earlier questions, this could be due to factors such as potential future networks, the school's reputation, quality of teachers, and the school environment. Such features form the commonly held narrative among citizens who place a higher emphasis on the importance of their children attending a good or brand-name school.

Among respondents who agreed, some pointed out that brand-name schools tend to have lower financial barriers or difficulties when it comes to introducing extra-curricular programmes. Top independent schools such as Raffles Institution and Raffles Girls School have gap year programmes aimed at providing global exposure. These encourage a deeper understanding of cultures outside of Singapore, as well as the pursuit and exploration of diverse career paths and possibilities. One respondent also pointed out that, "people from brand-name schools maintain and facilitate more connections. This can be attributed to the strong alumni community or school spirit at the workplace".

Respondents also mentioned that attending a brand-name school affects the next step of post-secondary life. This can be attributed to factors such as the quality of teachers and the environment one is in. Fellow students in brand-name schools may generally also be more studious, creating an environment that influences one to be more hardworking to avoid losing out. This may, in turn, result in students getting better grades due to strong personal effort and commitment driven by competition.

18. Children should not receive priority admissions to the primary school their parents/siblings attended.

54% of respondents agreed with the statement, 24% disagreed, and 22% were undecided.

The statement drew sharp responses, with both sides making strong arguments. One respondent mentioned that priority admissions should be removed as it “makes no logical sense and seeks to perpetuate the gap in social class and [thus] creates a [negative] cycle.”

Respondents that agreed with the statement believed the existing priority admission policy only serves to widen social gaps, especially when there is fierce competition to get into a particularly ‘brand-name school’.

On the other hand, respondents that disagreed generally argued that such policies are important to preserve school culture and identity, while also helping to strengthen bonds between children and their parents or siblings with common experiences. As one respondent explained, “This has a place just as proximity has a place when deciding whether a student should be enrolled into a primary school. It’s just a matter of the extent of these factors. Excluding it may erode that shared school spirit that helps bond children to parents”.

One respondent advocated for equality in the education system. “We need to consider [that] there are certain sections of schoolchildren [especially from lower-income families] who may not have ‘sufficient’ grades to enrol into their preferred [better] schools and who need this priority to at least gain entry into primary education”.

Some felt factors like a child’s residential proximity to a school should be of higher priority. “It’s not fair to children who are staying near the schools. Children who stay near the primary schools should be given admission, and not because their parents have attended the same school!”

There may be a lack of openness in the current benefits and detriments of this policy as suggested by respondents’ comments being more speculative and anecdotal. Hence, more research might be required to examine the effects of the primary school admissions exercise on social inequality and familial bonding.

19. My secondary school has/had provided me with higher education and career guidance which benefitted me.

37% agreed with the statement, 52% disagreed, and 11% were undecided.

Of the respondents who felt that they did not benefit from early career guidance (ECG) from their secondary school, most were completely unaware that their school provided such resources to begin with. For instance, one respondent mentioned, “I don’t recall my secondary school giving any career guidance at all”. This highlights that some believe ECG played only a minor role in their secondary education journey.

Additionally, even those who were aware of the availability of such guidance, expressed that it was inadequately vigorous and effective. One respondent shared, “my ECG lesson only involved filling up a survey which would then tell me my possible career option [and] it was not very accurate”. The methods used seem to lack any personal engagement, resulting in almost redundant results.

Many were also concerned that ECG programmes are too specialised or catered to the top students only. One respondent commented that “ECG programmes were primarily geared towards the Science and Technology sectors; there was minimal introduction to the Arts”. This showcases that ECG resources provided at secondary schools may be too narrowed to specific industries, limiting the exposure to its students or even discouraging those not interested in the featured industries. Another respondent mentioned that “the ECG programmes were not holistic, and only focused on specialised programmes for high achievers”. This illustrates a schism in which student profile is given the most ECG support, with other students who would benefit from additional, calibrated support not being given it.

This issue of exposure was brought up in most comments as well. One such respondent stated that “schools should invite speakers from different sectors and industries to share their careers, they do not even have to be outstanding ones.” An emphasis on exposure to the realities of the working world seems to be a missing element of secondary schools’ ECG programmes. Instead, there seems to be a greater focus on presenting a ‘role model’ for a perfect career. Many of the respondents seem to feel that at the secondary level, they are only exposed to ‘glamorous’ careers instead of a wide breadth of possible pathways which prevents them from making the best possible post-secondary and career choices.

Perhaps there is a need to review the approaches taken by secondary school ECG programmes, to focus more on exposing the students to every possible route that they could take, and not just the ideal or ‘safe’ ones. This would allow them to identify the routes which they feel may fit them best, and not pressure them to fit a particular mould. More involvement from the alumni networks may provide students with the opportunity to glimpse into careers that individuals with a similar background had decided to explore.

20. Attending a brand-name primary school will influence the opportunities I have in life.

Note: Brand-name primary schools are primary schools which are Special Assistance Plan schools, offer the Gifted Education Programme, or are affiliated with Integrated Programme (IP) secondary schools.

62% of respondents agreed with the statement, 30% disagreed, and 8% were undecided.

Generally, respondents who agreed with the statement felt that attending a brand-name primary school is important. However, it is one among several factors determining opportunities in life. They identified the following benefits of attending a brand-name primary school: co-curricular activities (CCAs), an academically competitive environment, an extensive alumni network, and affiliation to Integrated Programme (IP) schools. Notably, a few mentioned attending prestigious primary schools as a lasting advantage in secondary school and beyond. One respondent observed that alumni from the same brand-name primary school maintain close ties, even at the workplace.

Among those who disagreed, one comment echoed a common sentiment: “For those who make it to university, as long as you perform well in university, anything before that really doesn’t matter”. Another comment noted that attending a brand-name primary school may cause some students to be “out of touch” instead.

Overall, respondents approached the question from several different perspectives, from the anecdotal and personal to the more extrapolative. They were largely well-informed about Singapore’s education system, particularly about aspects unique to the Singaporean context, like the Gifted Education Programme and IP affiliation.

Which of the following factors would you consider the most important for getting ahead in life in Singapore?

Six choices were presented for respondents to choose from: ability, education, hard work and effort, knowing the right people, good luck, and lastly, one’s family background. 19% of respondents chose ability. 15% of respondents chose education. 21% felt that hard work and effort was the most important factor, while 28% chose to know the right people, 4% for good luck, and lastly 13% for one’s family background.

This demonstrates that most respondents believe that one’s connections and social capital are crucial to getting ahead in Singapore. There could be a potential correlation between one’s social capital and career opportunities in life, and this is often related to the privileges and background of the individual. Having the “right connections” may lead to possible industry networks which can be leveraged for one’s career.

The next options selected by respondents were hard work, effort and ability. This could be due to the narrative of meritocracy that forms the bedrock of Singapore's society and education system. However, meritocracy centres around merit and rewards, which is potentially problematic. As seen from the above, one's merit is largely contingent on the opportunities one has received in life, which is in turn correlated with socioeconomic class. Therefore, the less well-off are likely to fall further behind, while the privileged possess the resources to move ahead faster. That said, it is also important to realise that one's social standing in life may not necessarily be fixed in life, and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds can attain social mobility if they choose to work for it.

Some respondents chose education as the most important factor. As with the education system in Singapore, an important function of schools, especially in Institutes of Higher Learning, is to impart relevant skills and industrial-based knowledge to students. A commonly-cited example is Singapore Management University's (SMU) approach of greatly differentiating skills and content taught in the Business Faculty from those in the Social Sciences Faculty. SMU also spends a significant amount of time helping students acquire soft skills like effective communication, project management, interview skills and social skills in a business setting, which may prove invaluable for students.

Some respondents selected one's family background as the most important factor in life. This could be due to the difference in intergenerational resources that families from different income brackets can provide. For example, relatively well-off parents may have the option of sending their children for more tuition and enrichment classes, while those in the lower income bracket may not have the financial capability to do so. This may then affect the type of connections and opportunities one has in life.

Conclusion

The survey has highlighted the need for a whole-of-society approach to tackle social mobility, especially in the Government. Respondents generally agree that Singapore is insufficiently a society of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We must move faster given the fault lines across economic classes observed, or run the risk of allowing inequalities to widen further. Some may even fall off our social mobility ladder and never find their way up again.

Closing the opportunity gap and ensuring that the less-privileged do not get left behind is not just a question of getting by - it is also a question of getting ahead, especially with disadvantaged students facing various barriers to achieving their fullest potential.

"But I think the worry is not just inequality, but also worry about the lack of social mobility. Because people can accept that some are rich, some are poor, provided if I am poor I have a chance to work hard and get better off. If I am poor, my children have a chance to study hard and improve their lives...But if it is not like that, if people are poor, say there is no hope, the doors are closed, that we will always remain poor, and my children too, no matter what they do, then I do not think people will accept it. So I think social mobility is even more important than inequality."

- Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, People's Association Kopi Talk in October 2018

Appendix

Annex 1: Respondent Demographic

Age	
18 - 24	36.00%
25 - 34	44.00%
35 - 44	8.00%
45 - 54	0.75%
55 - 64	4.00%
> 65	7.25%
Gender	
Male	52.50%
Female	46.50%
Others	1.00%
Race	
Chinese	87.00%
Malay	3.90%
Indian	5.40%
Others	3.70%
Housing	
Rental	0.50%
HDB 3-Room	7.00%
HDB 4-Room	24.50%
HDB 5-Room	30.00%
Condominium/Private Apartment	23.50%

Private Landed Property	14.00%
Others	0.50%
Citizenship	
Singaporean Citizen	95.00%
Singaporean PR	4.00%
Foreigner	0.50%
Others	0.50%
Highest Education Attained	
PSLE	0.50%
GCE 'O' Levels	1.00%
GCE 'A' Levels and International Baccalaureate	20.00%
Polytechnic Diploma	11.60%
NITEC	1.00%
Vocational Qualifications/Other Diploma	1.00%
Bachelor's Degree	52.00%
Postgraduate Diploma/Degree	12.4%
Others	0.50%
Parents' Highest Education Attained	
Both parents graduated from university	22.72%
Only one parent graduated from university	17.67%
Both parents did not graduate from university	59.61%
School Brand	
Attended brand-name school	37.28%
Did not attend brand-name school	62.72%
Financial Assistance Application	
Applied	39.35%
Did not apply	60.65%
Received Financial Assistance	
Received	34.51%
Did not receive	65.49%

