

Speech by Minister, Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman at the 14th Global Educational Leadership Conference

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Colleagues, delegates and friends,

1. A very good morning to all. It is a pleasure to be here with you today at the 14th Global Educational Leadership Conference.

A Polarised World

2. The theme of this year's conference, "Leading with Hope in a Polarised World", is a particularly timely one.

3. In some ways, the world we live in has never been more connected. Companies and individuals easily move across borders to tap into new sources of talent and take advantage of new opportunities. Many of our youths will go on to work within the region, or even further abroad; even more will work alongside their overseas peers within Singapore. Our children are growing up in a world where media is instantaneously transmitted from one country to another; they are as familiar with Hollywood as they are with K-Pop.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated this trend, as video conferencing technology was adopted en masse. Platforms like Zoom and GoogleMeet enable us to connect more easily than ever before and allow us to work and learn from wherever we are – as some of us are doing now at this conference.

5. At the same time, this unprecedented level of hyper-connectivity has brought about new challenges. The speed of globalisation and technological advancement has intensified both competition and economic inequality, which in turn has generated anxiety, and sometimes even resentment, in those who feel they have been left behind. In many countries, this sentiment has been captured by political parties, leading to significant polarisation on a national level. The ease of spreading disinformation further exacerbates existing fault lines, increasing the risk of destabilizing societies.

6. On a global level, deep fractures are emerging too. The external environment is increasingly troubled, and we face storms that threaten the stability of the world and our region. For one, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has severely challenged the rules-based multilateral system, violating international law and the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The war, which has shown no signs of abating, has not only had spill-over effects on regional security in the Asia-Pacific, but has also further strained already fraught US-China relations. Tensions between the two major powers loom large over our region. As they intensify, Singapore could face greater pressure on all sides, diminishing our space to manoeuvre and operate. At the same time, the global multilateral trading system is under siege. Countries prioritise their domestic and national security interests, and trade can be weaponised when disputes arise.

7. These fissures will have profound implications for Singapore, where our national interests are based on our unique circumstances as a tiny city-state in the heart of Southeast Asia. Our youths are growing up in a divided world, where the very principles and mechanisms that form the foundation of Singapore's independence and success, such as sovereignty, international integrity and upholding the rules-based multilateral order, are at risk. They must learn how to guard against external influences, subtle and overt, that seek to divide Singapore. It is therefore critical to equip our youths with a keen knowledge of Singapore's long-term interests and the tools that are necessary for our continued peace, security and prosperity. They must internalize these core values and defend Singapore's interests.

8. On the domestic front, this includes the ability to pre-empt social issues before they arise by building a united, caring society which empowers all citizens, regardless of their starting points. This vision forms the basis of our Forward Singapore exercise, which many of you would be familiar with.

9. All of this begins with education. To face the challenges I have enumerated above, we must work together to ensure that our youths have the capacity and courage to engage in difficult conversations, the creativity to identify innovative solutions, and the competitiveness to keep up in a rapidly changing world.

10. Allow me to elaborate.

Capacity and Courage to Engage in Difficult Conversations

11. First, our youths must have the capacity to engage in difficult conversations and move past disagreements in order to find common ground and collaborate for the greater good. To do so, they must learn how to listen, absorb different perspectives, examine their own positions objectively, and engage one another in good faith, with the aim of coming to a common solution. Mutual respect is key. At the same time, our students must be keenly aware of global issues and challenges, and their implications for Singapore.

12. Our education system has already made shifts to equip our students with these skills. Take, for example, the refreshed Character and Citizenship Education curriculum, which creates space for students to engage in discussions on contemporary issues. Through this process, our youths learn to appreciate the complex considerations behind Singapore's policies and positions, and develop the necessary skills to advocate for innovative and sustainable solutions to local and global issues.

13. This is important because we are already seeing signs of increasing polarisation in Singapore. According to a survey of over 1,000 respondents conducted by Channel News Asia, 64 per cent of respondents observed an increased polarisation of views online in Singapore within the last five years. A separate survey, conducted by global public relations firm Edelman, found that fewer than one in three Singaporean respondents would be willing to help someone with whom they disagreed. Without decisive action, this polarisation will only worsen.

14. Learning to disagree agreeably and productively is not an easy lesson. It is far easier to double down on one's initial position and engage in reactionary outrage, especially in today's polarised media landscape. In addition to the courage of our convictions as we stand up for what we believe in, we must also have the courage to back down, change our minds, and admit we were wrong. It is this courage, and this capacity to engage in difficult conversations, that will stand our youths in good stead as they navigate the challenges ahead.

15. This means our educators will also need to be equipped with the right facilitation skills – able to model similar behaviours, show respect for divergent views, and help students navigate their thought processes effectively.

Creativity to Identify Innovative Solutions

16. Second, in the face of unprecedented challenges, our youths will need to be creative to identify innovative solutions. To succeed, they cannot be afraid to fail – in fact, they must have the courage and conviction to fail, and fail, and still try again. Success is when and what you have learnt from your failure!

17. Cultivating this creativity in our youths will require a whole-of-society approach, with all of us working together to broaden the definition of success beyond academic grades.

18. The fear of failure, and correspondingly, the appetite for risk-taking, creativity and innovation are closely linked to the pressures arising from narrow societal definitions of success. A 2015 study on student well-being, conducted by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), found that the frequency of testing is unrelated to student anxiety and mental well-being. Rather, anxiety is linked to how **threatening** tests are perceived to be, and how severe the perceived consequences of failure are. An over-emphasis on academic success increases the perceived consequences of failure, which in turn can harm our students' mental well-being and result in risk-aversion and a reluctance to innovate.

19. We have taken steps to reduce the emphasis on academic performance through removing mid-year examinations and developing multiple pathways to cater to students' diverse aspirations. It certainly does not help when parents get influenced by private tuition centres organising mock examinations.

20. Throughout their education, our students today are also exposed to a variety of programmes that help them develop a spirit of innovation and experimentation, such as Applied Learning Programmes, which encourage students to brainstorm novel solutions to real-world problems. At the same time, our schools create a safe and supportive environment that allows children to feel comfortable enough to try out new ideas, even if they fail.

21. Parents can support our schools' efforts by recognising and affirming their children's unique strengths and interests beyond the academic realm. They should also celebrate their children's efforts, champion a growth mindset, and create an open environment for discussion. This ensures that children are comfortable

speaking with their parents about mistakes, and consequently more willing to innovate, fail and learn from their failures.

22. We are often embarrassed to share our failures with others. As leaders, be open about your mistakes and normalise the process of sharing not just success stories, but 'constructive failure' stories. Encourage those around you – students, teachers, and parents – to value the learning process, not just the outcome, and to celebrate growth, not just grades. Listen to each other, learn from each other, and support each other to create a culture of innovation.

Competitiveness in a Rapidly Changing World

23. Third, lifelong learning is key to remaining competitive in a rapidly changing world. It is no longer enough for our students to be adequately prepared for the world of work at the point of graduation. Technology and globalisation are changing the nature of jobs and fuelling rapid skills obsolescence. In the coming years, we will see further disruptions to the world of work, as emerging technologies such as generative Artificial Intelligence become more commonplace, and new, more powerful technologies arise. The global competition for talent will be stiffer. Our students and workers must be ready to skill and reskill to remain relevant, and employable.

24. Our educators, too, must adapt. They will have to stay up to date on global developments to understand the future they are preparing their students for. They need to continuously learn to keep up with the rapid pace at which society is evolving in response to complex global problems, as well as demographic and political changes. More than that, they must role-model the attitudes and capabilities students will need to tackle contemporary challenges. This is why we have launched the Teachers' Work Attachment+ (TWA+) programme to allow our teachers some time off to venture out of their own comfort zones, leave their classrooms, acquire new skills or venture into new areas of interest and gain valuable experiences that will enhance their effectiveness as educators.

25. Lifelong learning need not be limited to formal learning, such as professional development courses or SkillsFuture modules. It can also involve informal learning. For example, our teachers can explore new industries through learning journeys and short-term attachments via the TWA+ programme and share what they have learned with their students. They can also learn from each other through informal classroom observations and discussions in professional learning communities.

26. Beyond that, I would like to encourage all of you here, as educational leaders, to actively take steps to create a culture that promotes lifelong learning. We encourage our students to explore their interests and find their passion through avenues such as Student-Initiated Learning, which sets aside time for students to extend their learning beyond the curriculum – to learn a language, pick up an instrument, or test a recipe. If our students can find something they truly value, enjoy, and wish to pursue – if they can grow into lifelong learners leading meaningful and purposeful lives – this too is a form of success.

27. The joy of learning should not be something that ends once a student graduates and starts work. Nor should it be only through a pathway that must lead to a

University qualification. Take the time to try something new and tell your students about it. Share what it is like to be a beginner again, and the thrill of slow improvement over time. Let our students know that learning never stops, and that there's always something new and interesting to be discovered as they grow. At the same time, they must be prepared to learn from their failures. It is this attitude – this desire and drive to continue learning and relearning – that will ensure we remain globally competitive in the years to come, while leaving no one behind.

Conclusion

28. Geopolitical issues may feel far removed from our everyday lives, but foreign policy begins at home. Our survival will depend on the continued success of Singapore as a country and economy, as well as strong support for our foreign policy. As our society ages and our population growth slows down significantly, we will continue to face the challenge of sustaining our economy to meet the increasing aspirations of our people. The groundwork for ensuring that Singapore stays united, stays resilient, and stays competitive despite a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape begins in the classroom.

29. As educators and educational leaders, you have a key role to play in shaping the culture of our educational institutions and guiding our students through an increasingly complex and polarised world. Your influence can help our students, teachers and parents rethink what 'success' truly means to them. We converge and appreciate that success is when each citizen feels that he/she is valued for who he/she is and the contributions he/she can make in society. Despite the challenges ahead, my hope is that all of you will stay optimistic about the possibilities the future offers, and that through your words and actions, you will inspire this same optimism in those around you.

30. I am sure that the day's discussions will spark productive conversations – and hopefully also constructive disagreements, as all of you consider how we can ensure our youths develop the knowledge, skill sets and values necessary to forge a brighter future for all.

31. I wish all of you a meaningful and fulfilling conference.

32. Thank you.

Source: Ministry of Education, Singapore