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Opinion

The real question for Singaporeans: Hungry for what?

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As an educator, employer and board member on several international academic bodies, I have been asked from time to time if Singaporeans are motivated enough to compete aggressively in a globalised job market.

In the eyes of the world community, this is usually a rhetorical question as Singapore is often held up as a shining example of a no-nonsense, ultra-competitive society that is not only hungry for success, but also has a clear vision of what success means.

But within Singapore this narrative has blown up after a legal recruiter here sparked online debate by claiming that companies are hiring foreign workers who are “hungrier” than locals.

From Stomp to Reddit to news publications, posters and experts have hit back at the notion.

For me though, it’s ironic. Singaporeans are known for our singular obsession with educational excellence, hard work and economic perseverance, reflecting the uncompromising work ethic we inherited since the founding of modern-day Singapore.

For more than half a century, this formula has elevated our standard of living, and helped pivot Singapore as a regional business hub. So there is no doubt that Singaporeans – younger generations included – have the iron in them.

The debate, however, misses a fundamental point. It is not whether “Singaporeans are hungry”, but rather, what do we hunger for and if that is relevant in today’s disrupted world of artificial intelligence, geopolitical rivalry and a diminished rule-based international system.

My experience with younger colleagues

As an employer, I work with many young Singaporeans who are hungry for success – at least, on the terms we know it as. It is not uncommon to find job applicants who have completed at least two to three internships by the time they graduate. Competition is acute, if not brutal.

The evidence on competitiveness is also corroborated by the amount of time we devote at work. A 2025 survey by the Ministry of Manpower shows Singaporeans worked 44 hours a week on average, exceeding 35 to 40 hours in Western developed countries, and comparable with other highly driven economies such as China and South Korea.

And what is driving our competitiveness? A year-long survey conducted by graduate career company GTI Media identified having career progression prospects, competitive compensation and job security as the top factors that matter most to graduates from local universities.

While these findings broadly reflect similar aspirations in other advanced developed economies, it is clear that neither factor is featured prominently in the current employment market which is besieged by calls for restructuring and retrenchment.

Singaporeans would be setting themselves up for disappointment if they insist on finding jobs that meet these expectations in the uncertain times today.

But beyond aspirational factors, the local work culture is also compounded by two Achilles heels common in Asian societies: a developmental tunnel vision and a tendency to avoid uncertainty.

Milestone-based structure, and avoiding change

Our life goals are mapped on a linear progressive pathway – study hard, graduate with distinction and you will be rewarded with a job that pays well.

This cognitive frame shapes our lives in many profound ways, including our attitudes to work and relationships. For instance, married couples are reluctant to consider having children until they establish a stable career, and this until recently has been determined by a narrow definition of academic performance.

In the long term, this mindset quietly erodes our capacity to navigate the complex world. Can a single-track thinking meet the challenges of the new world order? Probably not.

A consequence is that this tunnel vision has fermented a discomfort of the unknown, and this shapes the way we approach uncertainty, and how it affects existing rituals and quality of life.

In my interactions with students, I sense a general anxiety about exploring subjects outside their discipline even if their grades are not affected by this academic endeavour. This is a pity, as many of the research awards today have pivoted to multidisciplinary studies, and keeping the unfamiliar in abeyance also means missing out on the opportunities.

What is needed now?

Jensen Huang, chief executive officer of US tech giant Nvidia, was asked in an interview early in 2026 to define “smart” and what he thinks of the current education system.

For the Nvidia chief, having the ability to “see around corners”, in terms of sensing other people and inferring from the unspoken and the ability to pre-empt problems before they arise, are signposts of intelligence and the antecedent of success.

Crucially, he added that aptitude need not be correlated to academic potential, and there is a need to address how we educate future generations as the world’s current test-centric education system will largely become redundant due to AI.

In a new world defined by geopolitical volatility, economic uncertainty and rapid technological shifts, the systems that exist both inside and outside classrooms must evolve to break the linear pathway thinking. This means normalising ambiguity, creating environments to experiment and fail, and explore subjects outside their comfort zones.

Specifically, we could de-emphasise using grades for scholarship eligibility, enhance the recognition for services outside the classroom, and assign more weight to interdisciplinary collaboration in final-year projects.

Above all, the most powerful way to cultivate adaptability is through real, lived experience – especially in our own region. South-east Asia offers a rich, diverse ecosystem where Singaporeans can learn about the complexities of emerging markets and of the psychology of our neighbours – some of whom we regard as hungry competitors.

With appropriate fiscal incentives from the state, Singapore businesses with regional operations can help promote work-education exchange programmes for Singaporeans, curating the chance to experience social frictions and humility that no textbook can teach.

The road less travelled

With a job market characterised by uncertain prospects, volatility and technological disruption, the tried-and-tested script to achieving social mobility through education is no longer the gateway to success.

Social skills and real-life relationships matter. So does the tolerance of ambiguity, and the audacity to take a path that deviates from the familiar.

This is where some foreigners may have an advantage by virtue of the fact that they may not have caregiving responsibilities while working here. However, financial challenges and commitments back home drive them to take on more risk, do unexciting jobs and work long hours under harsh environments.

Even then, this is just half the story, because over a quarter million Singaporeans – more than one in 20 in our population – also study, work and live abroad. We are the proverbial “foreigners” in foreign lands and a segment of this diaspora is just as hungry to establish themselves.

For instance, the acceptance rate for Singaporean applicants to study at the prestigious Cambridge University is 26.5 per cent, significantly higher than the university-average 16.4 per cent. International

employers also consistently praise Singaporean graduates' strong technical skills, work readiness and desirable professional attributes.

It is tempting to dissect the discourse from a local-versus-foreign lens but the reality is more complex as both groups are not uniform. The thirst for success can be found in all nationalities, albeit manifested in different ways.

What we observe is not a deficit of motivation among Singaporeans. We are hungry for success, but the motivation is anchored on a legacy formula that is no longer sufficient in a rapidly changing world.

There is nothing we can do about the prevailing economic sentiment. We can, however, change the way we view success, embrace ambiguity with confidence, and refocus our strategy to develop our collective resilience.

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