

# The Passy Press

## Letter to the Editor

**From:** [y.c.chiang@undisclosed.com](mailto:y.c.chiang@undisclosed.com)

**To:** Nick Gardiner [enpg@thepassypress.com](mailto:enpg@thepassypress.com)

**Date:** September 10, 2014 2:45pm EST

**Subject:** Comments on John MacMurray's Essay on US Education

Dear Sir,

On the essay – the challenge indeed is improving education “broadly based”, and the same can be said of Singapore, good PISA rankings notwithstanding. The balance between depth and breadth and then when is a tough one and Singapore’s education traditionally leans heavily on the former and early – hence the global rankings. To some, it’s too much too soon but there are no easy answers when it comes to the right balance. And since it is subjective, ensuring access to opportunities and choice across a spectrum is equally important – unfortunately, not all are equally blessed as we know. Singapore is striving to correct both the balance and the available opportunities as we speak.

On my reference to “depth”, it’s really an allusion to the development of Singapore’s education system over time amalgamating both a UK-oriented program (Cambridge GCE style that tends to be more structured and specialized) and the Chinese cultural rote learning approach ie., less questioning, less independent-thinking and more formulaic style (there’s always a model answer!) While this could arguably be advantageous for more science and math-oriented subjects, it’s less so in the language arts, literature and more creative and inquiry-based type studies.

On the question of “breadth” – Singapore (as a paper-chase nation?) has traditionally been focused on pure academic results and has historically bucketed (or “stream”) students into different grades, academic abilities and fields – way too early in my view eg., “streaming” at the age of 9, “giftedness test” test at the age of 10, national exam at the age of 12 etc.. Once you fall into a bucket – it’s hard (if not impossible) to move elsewhere. The casualty is the development of “breadth” and knowledge in other areas – hence the oft-cited criticism of students being “exam-smart” rather than “real world-smart”. The government does recognize this (perhaps belatedly) and has made attempts to redress the balance but it remains not a small challenge.

With global connectivity and the internet age, the specialization, “depth” and pure academic results become less differentiating. It would be an understatement to say that today, the value is in the creative application of knowledge rather than the acquisition of and access to knowledge (rather than the need to memorize every bit of information, everyone can “Google” to get at the answer almost instantaneously). In this regard, I believe the US (at least the good/top schools) remain at the forefront. Singapore benefited from the nation-building years from “depth” (necessarily so maybe) but now has to build “breadth” to remain competitive in a connected global environment (good PISA scores notwithstanding!).

Best,

Yao-Chye

Dr. Y.C. Chiang is a Singapore resident and Chief Operating Officer of a major Asian private equity group. He is a graduate of University of Adelaide with a masters and doctorate degrees in Economics from Princeton University.