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Something's wrong with Singapore education

Published on 7th August 2014 • [Edit](#)



This article was published in The Independent Singapore on 7 August 2014.

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A day after Germany scored an amazing 7-1 semi-final win over host Brazil to qualify for the World Cup final, the Straits Times Communities posted a blog called 'German football team is like Singapore's education system'.

The blog says that "Singapore's rigorous education system is increasingly being derided for the very same reasons the German football squad is now being celebrated – it drills its kids in the basics and beyond to maximise their potential."

A poor comparison

The blog overlooks the fact that the two systems produce



graduates who go on to live in vastly different worlds. One group's expertise is very much in demand worldwide, while the other group is, simply put, not.

Even if Germany had lost the World Cup final to Argentina, it must be said that the German team would still be universally regarded as among the world's elite, whereas Singaporeans appear to lose out to foreigners in the competition for corporate leadership.

The July 10 blog proudly highlights "our students' top performances in worldwide tests and Olympiads". Singaporean education may provide a rock-solid system in helping students excel in exams. But so what? Singaporean students outperform their foreign peers in global tests. Once again, so what?

Much more importantly, we need to ask: How relevant is Singapore's educational system in preparing Singaporeans to take on the challenges of the working world? How good are our universities in grooming future corporate leaders?

Foreigners running Singaporean corporations

It is understandable if the odd corporation is unable to find a suitable Singaporean to be its CEO. However, there must be something amiss when foreigners working as CEOs are commonplace in Singapore, or when a foreign CEO steps down and is succeeded by another foreigner.

If the government's claims of meritocracy in Singapore are accurate and not merely hollow political rhetoric, it would mean that there is no reverse discrimination in Singaporean corporations and that it's true Singaporeans just don't cut it for certain CEO positions.

Let's see four examples.

1) Philippe Paillart became CEO of DBS Group Holdings in 2001 and was replaced by American Jackson Tai the following year. Tai stepped down in 2007, and Richard Stanley took over in 2008. Following Stanley's death in 2009, Indian national



Piyush Gupta assumed the CEO position.

2) At OCBC Bank, David Conner served as CEO for 10 years until 2012, when China-born and Hong Kong-raised Samuel Tsien was appointed to run the financial giant.

3) The lack of Singaporean leadership is not restricted to the financial industry. Darrell Metzger was CEO of Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) from 2002 to 2007. The CEO position was left vacant for 16 months, with no Singaporean within SDC deemed good enough to succeed Metzger, before Mike Barclay came on board in August 2008.

4) When Singapore Airlines (SIA) set up Scoot in 2011, the national carrier chose Campbell Wilson to be the CEO. SIA has existed for decades, yet apparently no Singaporean within its senior management team has gained enough experience to run a budget airline.

Isn't something wrong with Singapore's educational system when foreign-trained personnel, instead of Singaporeans, are continually being selected for leadership positions?

English football

Instead of likening German football to Singaporean education, it would be more appropriate to compare English football to Singapore's educational system.

Football academies in England are rigorous enough to produce professional players who make their living in the world's most powerful league. But despite the strength of the English Premier League (EPL), the England team is not exactly among the world's elite.

This is not surprising because many young, talented English footballers are being sidelined due to the presence of foreign players in EPL clubs, where the proportion of first-team local players is lower than that in German clubs. If young English players are continually not given enough opportunities to prove themselves, how can the England team improve?

The Three Lions' seemingly unending World Cup failures



suggest that English football desperately needs drastic changes. Perhaps the same could be said of Singapore's educational system.

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