YOUTH STEPS
YOUTH STUDY ON TRANSITIONS AND EVOLVING PATHWAYS IN SINGAPORE
KEY FINDINGS FROM WAVE 1 (2017) AND 2 (2018)

FOREWORD

We live in uncertain times.

The world as we know it has never been so volatile, and the future so fluid. The paradigm shift from paper qualifications to skills; the impact of disruptive technologies; and the rapidly changing values and cultural fabric of our city-state are signs of the changing environment that youths will face in the years ahead.

Being a youth in Singapore today is complex. On one hand, they appear to have it all; fewer young people today have to worry about day-to-day survival faced by earlier generations of Singaporeans. Instead, there is now an abundance of opportunities to maximise their potential.

On the other hand, this empowerment comes with great responsibilities. While there is much to be thankful for, there is also plenty of reason to feel lost in transition. Each career or education-related decision often involves a trade-off between competing priorities. In today's results-focused environment, making a less-than-perfect choice now could alter a young person's experiences tomorrow in profound ways. This is further compounded by the fact that life trajectories are not uniform – some encounter significantly greater difficulties navigating issues surrounding their social or family circumstances.

The Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth STEPS) was born out of a desire to understand the myriad developmental pathways of young Singaporeans. The longitudinal design, emphasis on youth-specific issues, and focus on points of inflexions in youths' life-stages are the hallmarks of this study.

What are the key takeaways from the first two survey waves? Results show that young Singaporeans emphasise self-reliance and yearn for autonomy in their quest for personal success. They are able to endure hardship and persevere through problems.

Yet this emphasis on their own efforts does not diminish their concern for the wellbeing of fellow Singaporeans. They care about the less fortunate and the elderly, and are willing to share the responsibility in providing for their needs. Their hope for a better society is reassuring as we move forward together to achieve a collective vision for Singapore.

The Youth STEPS team

GUIDED BY THEIR VALUES

For young people standing at the crossroads of life, making major decisions is complicated. They are charting their way in a world with seemingly boundless possibilities (and perils) whilst negotiating ever-changing goal posts. What anchors our youths as they navigate the various demands placed on them by themselves and others?

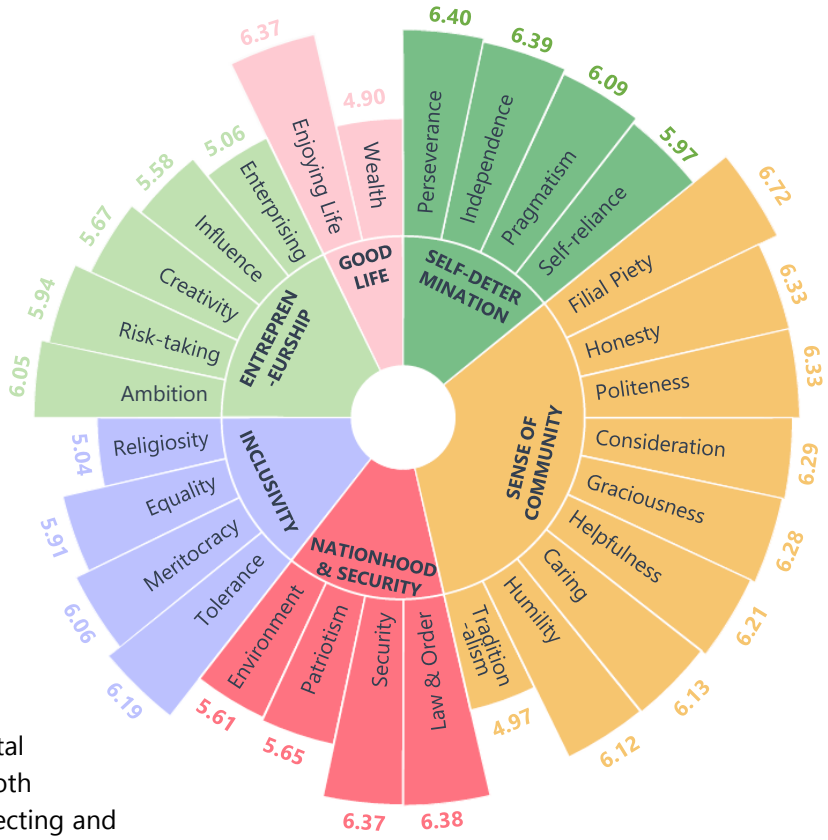
Before the study began, we held a series of pop-up engagement sessions to consult over a thousand youths. We gave them an opportunity to contribute to the study and the big question which youths asked of their generation was:

What are our values?

This question was posed to our panellists, and they answered that many values are important to them. Given a list of 28 values, panellists regarded most values to be of at least moderate importance (mean scores of at least 5 on a 7-pt scale), indicating that our youths have a strong and diverse set of values.

IMPORTANCE OF VALUES
(MEAN SCORES ON A 7-PT SCALE)

Q. The following are statements related to values and attributes. Please tell us how important these values and attributes are to you by rating each item on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being "Not important at all" and 7 being "Extremely important".



Of these, values relating to **self-determination** and **sense of community** are of highest importance. Individual ambition is often juxtaposed against societal values, but youths today value both greatly. Panellists believe in respecting and taking care of their family members and the elderly. At the same time, they take it upon themselves to achieve success through their own efforts, without wanting to depend on others.

Personal values reflect what is important in life. They guide a person's choices and actions and influence their attitudes and worldview. Navigating life while holding a diverse set of values is not easy, especially when the stakes seem higher. Young people strive to strike a balance between looking out for themselves but also for others around them. At times, these values can become a source of tension for a young person seeking to make decisions regarding their future education, work and other major life choices.

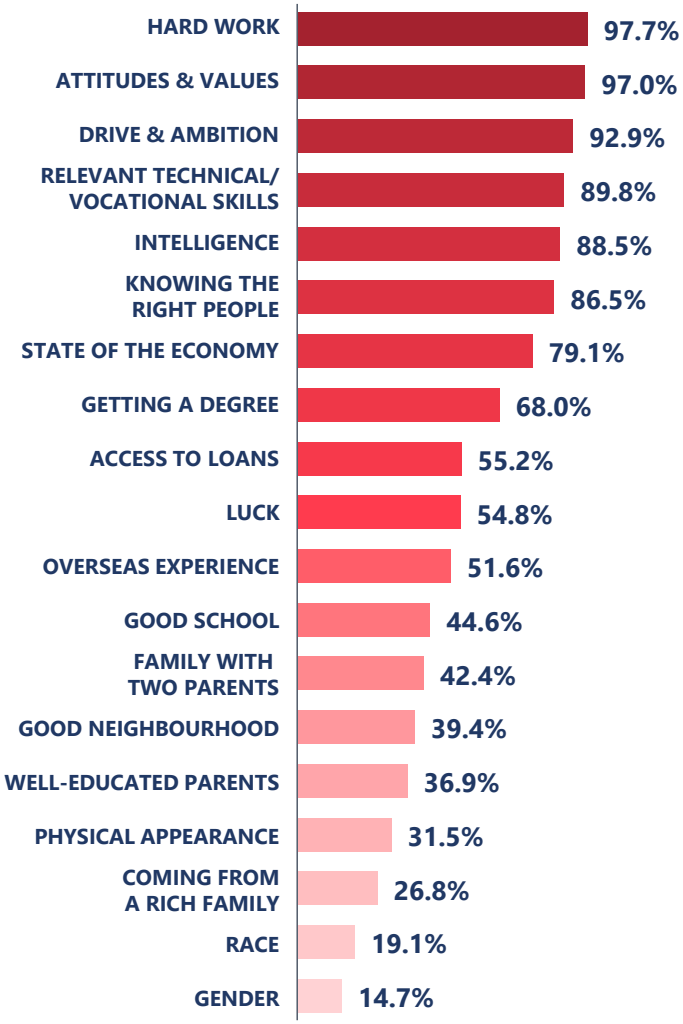
WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE IT

What makes a person successful in life? Is it their starting point, their innate attributes, their journey or their efforts that determines what opportunities are available to them and how much they can achieve in life?

Even in the face of obstacles, few believe they are held back by their circumstances. The ingredients which they perceive as important for success in life are accessible to everyone.

IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS
(% WHICH RATE 5 AND ABOVE ON A 7-PT SCALE)

Q. The following are statements on perceptions on how some people become successful in life. There is no right or wrong answer. Please rate the following statements for achieving success in Singapore from 1 to 7, with 1 being "Not important at all" and 7 being "Extremely important".



Nearly all panellists feel that success can be achieved with hard work (97.7%), the right attitude (97.0%) and drive (92.9%). On the other hand, innate factors such as gender (14.7%) and race (19.1%) are perceived as the least important determinants of success.

Other factors such as skills and education, personal networks and economic conditions are also viewed as important, but still come behind an individual's effort and motivation. This order reveals young people's keen awareness that self-determination is necessary to achieve success in the face of adversity, not in the absence of it.

It is also worth noting that possessing relevant skills (89.8%) is deemed as important by more panellists, compared to having educational qualifications (68.0%). This difference suggests a resolve for self-improvement and a tenacity to stay relevant amidst the constantly changing work environment that young people confront today. Getting a degree is important for many, but for most youths in transition, learning does not end after formal education.

STEP BY STEP

Despite the uncertainty of the future, our youths are not sitting idle. Armed with their values and drive, step by step, our panellists are making strides forward in life.

Between waves, a large proportion of our panellists remain in education, with 59.4% and 51.5% studying full-time in Wave 1 and 2 respectively. Others have stepped out into the workforce. In Wave 2, nearly a quarter (23.6%) of panellists report being engaged in full-time work, up from 18.0% in Wave 1.

BETWEEN WAVES, THE % OF NON-SCHOOLING PANELLISTS ROSE FROM 37.3% TO

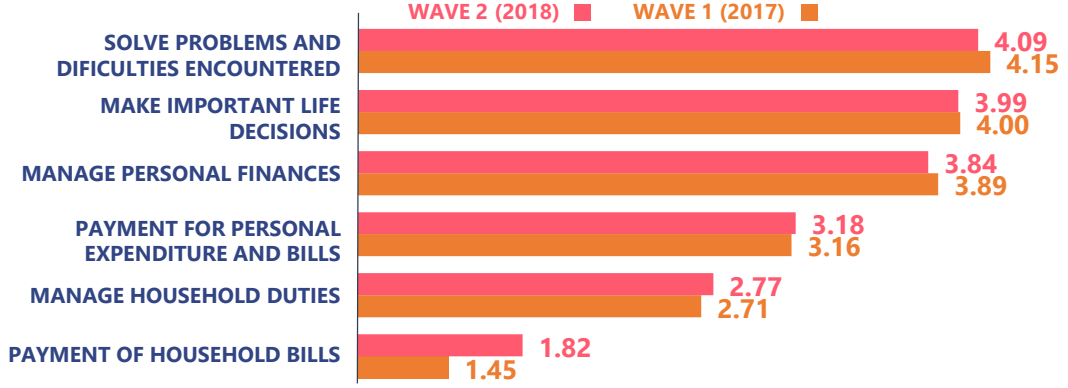
56.2%

As can be expected of youth in transition, they have to contend with the complexities of adult life; taking responsibility primarily for themselves and, increasingly, for others. They rely upon themselves to solve personal problems and make important life decisions. While they may not yet be entirely responsible for managing their households, our panellists are beginning to take up a greater share of household duties and payments for bills. As the study progresses, it remains to be seen how these milestones of adulthood will be managed by our panellists in future waves.

EXTENT OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

(MEAN SCORES ON A 5-PT SCALE)

Q. How much responsibility do you currently take for the following? Please rate from 1 to 5, with 1 being "Somebody else does this for me all of the time" and 5 being "I do this all of the time".



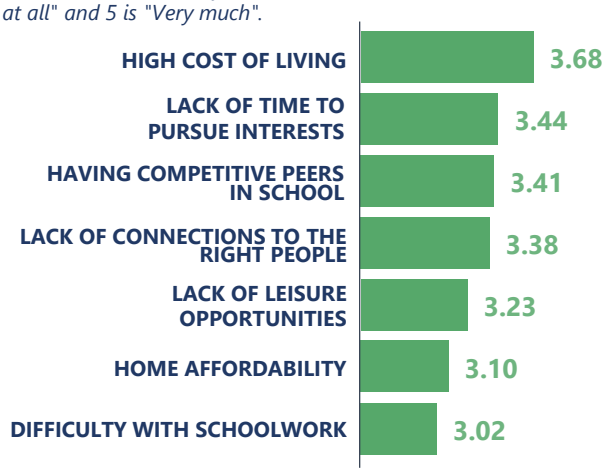
In this journey towards adulthood, their lives are not always smooth sailing.

Out of a list of 32 challenges regarding daily living, career, education, health, citizenship and social networks, our panellists rated which ones affect them the most. Unsurprisingly, cost of living, a key concern for many Singaporeans, affects young people the most. The following challenges reported reflect the stress and pressure associated with the fast pace of life and competition in Singapore. In this competitive environment, young people have less time for personal interests or enjoyment as they strive to secure a better future. They are feeling the pressure to get their lives on track – and to do so quickly in order to stay ahead of their peers.

TOP 7 CHALLENGES

(MEAN SCORES ON A 5-PT SCALE)

Q. The following is a list of challenges that you might have faced or are already facing. Please rate how these challenges affect or have affected you on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "Not at all" and 5 is "Very much".



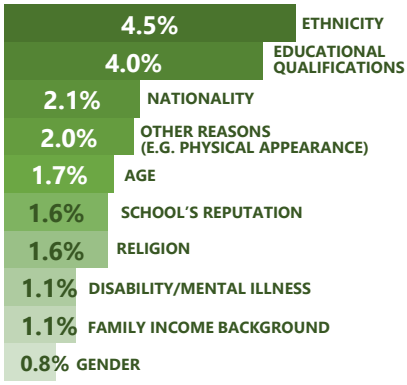
Yet, on a more encouraging note, responses from the panellists suggest that the rest of the challenges listed do not pose great difficulty (mean scores of less than 3 on a 5-pt scale). There are two possible interpretations – one being that our panellists are young, and the reality of these challenges has yet to hit them hard; or that Singapore, in spite of high cost and other issues, has fostered an environment where young people are resilient and able to thrive in the face of challenges.

Our panellists' values reflect their belief in equality and the importance of the welfare of others. Yet some reported that they had experienced unfair treatment either at school, at work or in a social setting. The top reasons for discrimination were one's ethnicity and one's educational qualifications.

Despite these challenges faced, panellists remain optimistic about their lives – 71.6% report being satisfied with their lives and they have hope for a better future.

MAIN REASONS FOR DISCRIMINATION

Q. Over the past 5 years, have you been discriminated against with regard to school, work or the community? In your opinion, what was the main reason for the discrimination?



NOT FORGETTING THOSE LEFT BEHIND

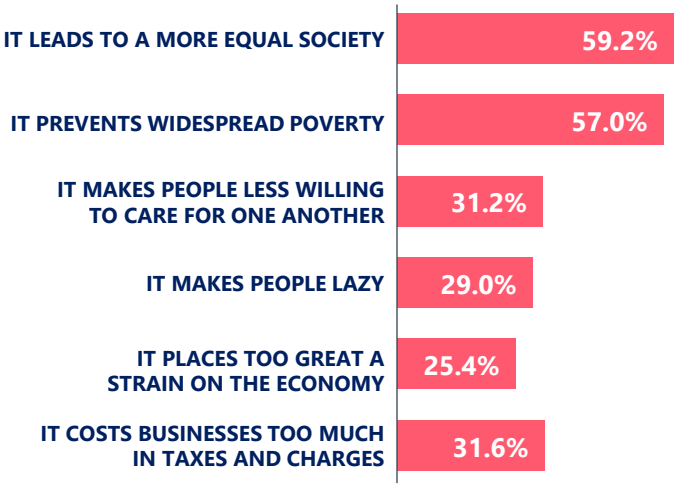
While young people are working toward their own success, they also look out for those around them. Contrary to the image of a self-entitled and narcissistic generation, youths in Singapore today are both grounded by community values and more keenly aware of the social issues affecting their fellow countrymen.

Looking at their values, it is evident that panellists care about others and believe in the importance of a cohesive society. In line with their sense of community, the top three policy areas which panellists would contribute towards improving are welfare for the poor and needy, healthcare, and eldercare support. Their desire to contribute toward these three areas demonstrate what matters to them – not forgetting those that may be falling behind.

VIEWS ON SOCIAL BENEFITS

(% WHICH REPORT AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE)

Q. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about social benefits and services in Singapore? Please rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "Strongly disagree", and 5 being "Strongly agree".



More than half of the panellists also express positive views about social benefits and services in Singapore. Reflecting their belief in the value of providing support to those who may need it, they agree that it helps society to be more equal and prevents poverty; and are much less likely to agree with negative views about social benefits such as causing laziness or a strain on the economy.

In summary, these sentiments demonstrate a desire for an equal and inclusive society which uplifts those who may need assistance.

With our panellists' desire to see that help is provided for those who need it, the next big question then is: whose role is it to provide this support? Some panellists feel that it is the government's role, but the majority (52.0%) believe that the responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for should neither fall solely upon the government nor the people. For young people, social welfare can be viewed as a shared responsibility between the people and the government.

The first two waves of Youth STEPS show that our youths are driven and have a vision for Singapore. They strive for their own success but are still concerned about the broader collective interests of others. How can we support and cheer them on as they navigate their life trajectories and take up increasing responsibilities at home and in their communities? Through Youth STEPS, we hope to continue to shine light on their complex trajectories and changing values and attitudes to help provide relevant and actionable youth insights for policy-making and youth programmes.

ABOUT YOUTH STEPS

In September 2017, the National Youth Council and the Institute of Policy Studies Social Lab launched the **Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth STEPS)** to study the sentiments and behaviours of young Singaporeans. As the first national-level longitudinal study on young people's experiences from adolescence to adulthood, Youth STEPS follows our panellists across six years as they live, study and work in Singapore.

In Wave 1, the Youth STEPS panel comprised of 4,041 youths between the ages of 17 to 24. The panel is representative of national proportions of the youth population by gender, ethnicity and age group.

Annual survey fieldwork and data analysis are undertaken by IPS Social Lab. To date, two Waves of the study have been completed in 2017 and 2018.

For queries on Youth STEPS, please contact the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong at leong.chanhoong@nus.edu.sg or +65 6516 5601

ABOUT THE NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL

The National Youth Council (NYC) believes in a world where young people are respected and heard, and have the ability to influence and make a difference to the world. Together with their partners, NYC seeks to develop future-ready youth who are committed to Singapore by instilling in them a heart for service, resilience and an enterprising spirit.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES AND IPS SOCIAL LAB

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was established in 1988 as an independent think-tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore. Today, IPS continues to analyse public policy, building bridges between thought leaders, and communicate its findings to a wide audience. IPS Social Lab is an independent centre under IPS for social indicators research. It seeks to understand Singapore society through survey-based research on social perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in Singapore, using the most robust standards in survey methodology and statistical analyses. IPS Social Lab is committed to serve the public interest as a national resource centre for longitudinal data.