



#4 Chiu Wei Li 2009/07/26 at 4:53pm

Nobody owes any young Singaporean a living; negotiating colossal bureaucracies are tough anywhere; the idea of a S\$400,000 student loan that depreciates to nothing over a given period is god-send for talented individuals at a tender age of 19; let's count our blessings.

#5 Howard 2009/07/26 at 9:06pm

Every student should read this post.

#6 Arie 2009/07/26 at 9:23pm

While some might feel a bond is a small price to pay for the x amount of money that one needs to fork out for a "good, overseas education", there are its cons, as the Author has pointed out. And rightly pointed out, may I add.

The 2-6 years of life that is spent in a position, where sometimes your dreams might not become a reality, is hardly an enviable "blessing".

I was never a scholar, and I used to constantly envy my cousins and people I knew who earned a scholarship, nevermind the bond. I thought, "only 2-6 years, whatever it is, it's worth it." I joined a bank, working office hours to save up for an education overseas, since I didn't do well at all in my A's, and finally got a chance to come to Australia to study.

To be dramatic, my eyes opened. Firstly, the job I had was dismal, not something I wanted. The course I studied were to merely impress my relatives, that I could be as smart as their precious scholarly children. The more I learnt in my course, the more I didn't want to be a part of my superficial dreams.

Without telling my parents, I quitted the original university, worked in a "low-class" job, earned more money than my peers who graduated in Singapore ever did, then went on to be a trainee nurse.

I hurtled myself too, and it was impressively scary, but a wonderful feeling to be set free. I love my job now, and I am happy every day of the week – something few of my peers and scholarly cousins can say. Looking back now, I can safely say, I am glad I was never bonded.

#7 undergrad student 2009/07/27 at 7:16am

Hi,

Thank you for your article. I am an undergraduate currently studying at an American university. Coming from a 'prestigious' Junior College, applying to scholarships was the norm for most of my classmates. However, I was adamant (or you could say stubborn) enough to not be caught up in that flurry. Although that means spending thousands of money, I thought that it would be worth the experience. In fact, I remember telling my parents that I would get a loan if they could not pay.

In retrospect, that was perhaps too naive of me to underestimate the difficulty of forking out such large sums of money. However, till today I have not regretted my decision. First of all, I knew that getting a government scholarship was not suitable for me, especially emotionally. Now, I love Singapore, but I could not see myself working for an organisation that I am reluctant to work with, nor could I imagine myself being comfortable with the lack of freedom that signing the bond entails. 6 years may not be much for some, but these are perhaps the most important years of one's career. The purpose of university education is to allow one to discover himself and what he would like to do in his life. Forcing someone to make that decision in the tender age of 18 is rather unreasonable and unrealistic.

Sure, with the current economy in demise, it may be nice for some to think that they have a stable job fresh out of college. They need not worry about preparing for job interviews, going to career fairs, perfecting resumes, or even taking a simple personality test to try figure out what career fits them. However, from my experience so far, a large part of learning comes from taking the time to consider your own career path and life. I do not know very well my path ahead, but I have some idea of a plan. I have been quite lucky so far, but I don't know whether they will work out. Still, I believe I would find a way if they don't. My future is filled with uncertainty, and together with that, excitement and independence. I have all the freedom to go where I want to go. And that, I believe, is worth any price.

I hope all graduates out there considering a government scholarship would be able to read your article.

#8 koinonia 2009/07/27 at 11:46am

Thanks for this. It resonated. I recently finished my bond too.

I was blessed in a way. I came back still wanting to serve. Not particularly enamoured by consulting or IBanking. Some people change. Some people are pretty much the same in terms of their aspirations.

Scholars should be aware that if they do not make it into the Administrative Service, they do, in a sense, fall by the wayside. And whatever they say, no one from then on is really looking out for you. Or cares what career trajectory you hurtle along or flounder about.

#9 wai 2009/07/27 at 12:03pm

I am sure you were a bright, energetic and bubbly 19-year old and I am sure you became a great teacher. =)

I think it's still not too late to work on book publishing in New York.

#10 Audrey 2009/07/27 at 3:23pm

Intriguing read. It's strange to be on the other side of the coin — being Malaysian and having graduated from an American university (the best decision of my life) through my parents' funding and having the absolute "freedom" to pursue a dream job after graduation. Now two years have passed and I recently quit my first real full-time job because it wasn't as fulfilling as I wanted it to be and idealistically hoping to find a job that I truly love. When I left my job, I was called "idealistic" in the very same tone by one of my bosses who was Singaporean.

Feeling lost and slightly cynical at the moment, going through the what-ifs in my head, especially seeing ex-classmates happy with their careers and married with kids. Thank you for your superbly-articulated piece. It was a refreshing read, giving perspective into what would have happened if I had taken a different path years ago.

#11 Ah Choo 2009/07/27 at 5:32pm

I really like the article.

However working for the government as your first job will leave an impression that which cannot be easily erase. The impression of how things should be done will be left. So much so that when you change job, you still revert to how to do things based on that impression.

The thing which I find sad is that as what you mentioned sometime people do things just for the sake of doing or just to please the bosses. The underlying purpose of doing the the work is gone. Lost in office politics. The coffeeshop talk will sometime reference to some commonsense thing which our "Scholars" have not thought about. These are not the scholars you wrote about.

What we need, or everyone need, is people with the passion. Passion to do what they like and allow that passion to be rub off onto those around. In a way motivating them. Not just being a money seeking individual.

#12 curiouser 2009/07/27 at 6:05pm

I was intrigued by the bright young scholar who turned down a bond-free scholarship to a US university to take up a bonded scholarship to Cambridge.

What sorts of calculus might have led to her eventual decision? She could have joined the civil service after her US univ education. National Service was not a factor, nor was money (I assume, since the US gig was also on a scholarship).

I was a govt scholar who would not have been able to study Lit overseas if not for the scholarship (the alternative was a place to do Law at NUS); by the time my younger sister's turn came, she was able to turn down a scholarship to study overseas at the same university as I did on a pa-ma bursary — she subsequently decided that Lit was NOT for her, and swapped to Finance in a different country altogether, and as a result is now in a juicy position at a major MNC abroad.

Life takes people to funny places — it is in fact detrimental to Singapore as a whole to bind people to work for which they are less than ideally suited.

Perhaps we should delink the scholarship (prestige) component from the bursary (money) component.

Then again, it is certainly true that young people need to take more hard-nosed responsibility for their own futures. It is quite unfair to expect the Civil Service (or any organisation) to provide satisfactory lifelong employment — sorry, those days are over in any industry. Nor could Singapore reliably lean on an army of bright, highly-paid but fundamentally unmotivated (or worse, disgruntled) civil servants.

Caveat Emptor cuts both ways. We need to be comfortable, as a society, in saying “no” to the “obvious” choices, or in accepting the responsibility of making unconventional ones.

#13 leon 2009/07/27 at 6:09pm

Thank you Yu-Mei. I've thoughts and feelings very similar to yours.

Not much about the scholarship system has changed, unfortunately. For instance, the MAP is effectively an extension of the Admin Service — all that is good and bad about the latter.

I felt sad reading about your former student btw. I hope she really did make up her mind by herself.

#14 kungfuzi 2009/07/27 at 7:42pm

Hi Yu Mei, nice chatting to you just now and hopefully this piece will give some of my students pause before (when?) they plunge headlong into the application process at the end of this year. I'll let you know what they think. You know what I think!

#15 Mark 2009/07/27 at 10:08pm

An interesting read, and it resonates with me. I have also completed my bond (Literature, Leeds Uni) and am in the process of getting out.

#16 John 2009/07/27 at 10:31pm

A must read for every student intending to take up any government scholarship.

#17 homing pigeon 2009/07/28 at 12:13am

some scholars have crashed and burnt. badly. and not all of them lived to tell their tale. yet they receive truckloads of condemnation for being 'stupid', 'ungrateful' and 'insensitive' for being in the unfortunate position of making a commitment to something that they found out too late was personally detrimental to them.

i urge that people try to understand that scholarships may be 'good', but the bond that follows is really not suitable for everybody. and for those who are in the position to choose, please make the wise choice. not the purely pragmatic one.

#18 B 2009/07/28 at 1:31am

I'm currently bonded as well and used to think the same thing – perhaps I could have asked my parents to pay for my overseas education or taken a loan. That would have given me more freedom to find a job I really like.

But I don't think that's realistic. What would have been the collateral for the loan? The bank would not have given you one, especially for such a hefty sum. The collateral would inevitably have been your parents' home, therefore technically an indirect loan from your parents. Banks do not care much for loans to students. The only real alternative you could have had was to apply for a bond-less scholarship or applied for a grant at a USA university for your full tuition. Bondless scholarships are incredibly few and it is not easy at all to obtain a full grant.

I know that where I am working right now is not the right place for me. The work I carry out does not interest me and after I have completed my bond period, I intend to leave for a different industry. However, I do not regret taking the bond because, is it really any child's right to demand such a large sum of money from parents to study overseas when the local university is decent enough? It was shocking to me, when I first begun work, on how many years I would have had to work in order to pay for my overseas tuition. That's not counting salary set aside for living expenses! It is not easy making money and I think as children, we often take for granted how easily our parents give theirs up to us. I hope those who have studied overseas on FMS – father mother scholarship – will consider paying back their parents over time even if not expected to do so.

#19 Yanhui [2009/07/28 at 3:49am](#)

Thank you for this article Yu-mei, it resonated. Though I am not a scholar like you are, I was able to relate to the many facets of the Singapore educational system that you had so accurately portrayed.

#20 stupidchicken 2009/07/28 at 8:01am

I have a year to go on my teaching scholarship, which I was quite enjoying until the machinery of "talent development" shuffled me into a job that I find little meaning in, and which I'm actually rather terrible at. "I didn't sign up for all this paper-pushing", I think on occasion, before settling in to the dreadful monotony of getting through the work week. I just have a year to go.

#21 ladida 2009/07/28 at 10:00am

agreed, even for those in the medical field like moi, i feel the same.

#22 ivan 2009/07/28 at 10:14am

This piece resonates soundly in my heart. I hate my job. I hate the rat race I'm in, I hate the red tape, the lack of freedom in decision making. I have started to loathe the people who take advantage of the government's ranking system and I hate how much less I earn doing the same job, compared to scholars. I hate that the lives of so many are placed into the hands of so few. A simple push of a paper is all it takes to change job scopes, change tradition. Change lives. If they'd wanted to do that, perhaps they should've joined the Singapore Prison Service.

I am not a scholar, only an awardee. I did not study overseas, only locally. I am leaving. And this article has certainly bolstered that resolve. Thank you Yu-Mei.

#23 Physics Wizard 2009/07/28 at 10:33am

Thanks for the article. Many years ago, I was one of the top students graduating from Raffles Junior College. In contrast with all other top-performing friends that I knew, I decided against applying for a government scholarship to study overseas. I was influenced by two factors; the lengthy bond and the lack of support to study my choice of course, i.e. Physics. I went on to take a 'bond-free' scholarship to study at a local university.

Many of my friends criticised me and thought I was really stupid. However, I was undeterred and followed my heart rather than succumbed to everyone else's expectation. Over the years, I kept on hearing about my friends' wonderful experience studying abroad and began to doubt my previous fateful decision. My experience at the much lauded 'world class' local university fell short of my expectation and I began to harbour some regrets of not taking up the overseas studies scholarships.

After reading your article, I felt that I probably made the correct decision. Being a cog in a very large machine doesn't suit me and I don't think I could survive in a large bureaucratic organisation – my tolerance for inefficiency and mindlessness is quite low. =) Thanks for relieving me from the guilt and regrets.

#24 joyce [2009/07/28 at 12:45pm](#)

thanks so much for this well-written article. it really echoes my feelings. i'm almost at the halfway mark of my bond now. would really like to share with you some stuff, but not really at liberty to disclose here... email me? :)

#25 Crapping about what? [2009/07/28 at 1:11pm](#)

~~I really don't know what you're crapping about.~~

Some people enjoy working in large set-ups, others do not. That's why some people join SMEs after they graduate, while others would only apply to MNCs. The experience, both academically and personally, of furthering your studies and training and spending four years in the US or UK is inimitable.

There have been many scholars who leave the service after they complete the bond, and even more who stayed on because it is their calling and they feel competitively rewarded for their contribution.

My best friend signed on the dotted line at 19 years old to one of the top PSC scholarships. Like anyone else who works in this world, he doesn't think his job is perfect, but he still feels the



meaningfulness of his profession till this day and continues to enjoy the indescribable satisfaction of contributing to the welfare of his fellow people.

That remains to be the impact and main driving force of the PSC scholarships, from the day it was conceived till today.

#26 Annie 2009/07/28 at 1:19pm

~~'Physics wizard', you could save your crapping for elsewhere, maybe where you would have a more ignorant audience who doesn't know squat about the scholarship system.~~

All of us know that PSC allows its scholars to study anything, including general humanities and sciences like Physics. They even let the SAFOS who will work in the military study almost anything they want, including Physics. They can even do law out of interest, if they wish.

The only scholarships that limit the course of studies are the ones that are specialised to the career track of that scholarship, ie Astar. And in this case, I am very sure Astar scholars can and do study Physics.

~~I also find it thoroughly amusing that for someone claiming to be passionate about the sciences of all subjects, you would 'end up' in a local university haha. Another amusing note is your comment on 'mindlessness' and 'inefficiency', are you talking about your university and the people you're surrounded by..~~

~~One of the top students of your JC indeed hahaha.~~

#27 s/pores 2009/07/28 at 1:39pm

Editors' note. It is unfortunate that Annie, who is responsible for the last two edited comments, has decided to get personal in his/her comments. We expect rigorous but mature debates, and yet we want to be minimal in censorship. Thus, to show our disapproval of personal attacks, we will cross out such remarks, but will not delete them. To protect our journal, comments of a more inflammatory nature will be deleted. Thank you everyone for your responses, please don't forget to be civil in your disagreements.

#28 Indeed 2009/07/28 at 2:27pm

My husband is a Public Service Commission scholar who studied Physics in a top university, at both undergrad level and for his master's, the latter for which he went to a HYPISM.

Because of the clearly false and suspicious claims, I think the one claiming to be one of the top students of his JC is your typical scholarship reject, one of the over 2000 a year who apply and don't get even called up for the first interview. It's human nature to rubbish the things we can't get. And even more so to later soothe oneself with self-assuring posts like this. I was just talking to a friend last night, about a woman in my office who 'rubbished' living in landed property (she lives in a HDB-built Yishun EC - executive condo) cos she thinks "taking care of it is so tedious, like the grass, piping and pests" haha.

P/S: reality check, the only ever people who say NUS is 'world class' are people in NUS, hence your poor and dismal experience now.

#29 Indeed 2009/07/28 at 2:53pm

Well, something's only 'personal' when it's not true. When it's true, it's never personal, but are mere facts. If you speak facts, what you say must be defensible and can stand up to scrutiny, hence you need not fear. :) All of us know the facts, and those who don't, can check them easily.

#30 caught 2009/07/28 at 2:58pm

There is no government scholarship in Singapore that disallows its scholars to do Physics.

<http://news.asiaone.com/News/Education/Story/A1Story20090726-157105.html>

'Others like 19-year-old Philip Chan, who will do physics and philosophy at Oxford University on a PSC scholarship, also got a heads up from his seniors. They told him he would be asked many questions, so he was mentally prepared for a tough session.' The interviewers kept throwing hypothetical situations at me,' he said, recalling being asked what he would do if refugees were to descend on Singapore.'

# 31 subjects 2009/07/28 at 4:09pm

it's only in recent years that the PSC has been willing to widen the scope of subjects for scholarships. in the mid-90s, a friend wanted to study physics and philosophy at oxford, but PSC did not allow him to do so. In the end, following his passion, he did not take up the scholarship but went ahead with what he wanted to study. Now he has a PhD in philosophy, and staying on in Oxford to pursue his passion. important to note: he was able to do so because his family could afford the cost of study

#32 scsy 2009/07/28 at 5:06pm

Thank you for such a well-written article.

As a student on the threshold of “not knowing what lies ahead” after yet another ‘stage completion’ in our education system, the points you touched on really resonated and have helped shed some light on the subject of Govt. Scholarships out there.

#33 relieved 2009/07/28 at 5:52pm

Thank you the insightful article. I am no scholar though I was from one of the top 5 junior colleges. I often frowned upon my friends who spent a large part of their time applying for various scholarships which promise a fulfilling undergraduate experience in a prestigious overseas university, a rewarding career, excellent remuneration and sorts. I did query most of them, on whether they knew exactly what they were getting themselves into and whether they could see themselves working for their respective sponsor. Most did not seem to care much. To them as long as they have a scholarship, they stood a better chance in life. That left me in dismay, thinking that I was probably plain jealous and sour that I did not do well enough to compete with them in the scholarship applications.

I have since graduated from a local university. In retrospect, perhaps my views and queries posted to my peers then were in fact valid. I hope all of them do find their dream future with their sponsors.

#34 Limitlim 2009/07/28 at 8:08pm

A tangential anecdote (feel free to laugh out loud with the PSC):

On the cusp of finishing my LMS-Teaching bond in 2004, the following telephone conversation:

Me: Hi, PSC? I wrote you an email about my bond liability. I need to “break” my bond because I’m starting graduate school in the US. But I only have two weeks left, can some arrangement be made so I don’t have to pay damages?

PSC: Let me see – yes, you want to resign on Aug 15 – that means only two weeks to the end of the bond. Why don’t you serve it out?

Me: Term starts at my Univ about a week from then, and I want to give myself some time to settle into a new city. But I’m teaching right up to the weekend before I leave, can some arrangement be made that releases me from paying damages?

PSC: [With laughter] Actually, since we round up the sum you are liable for to the nearest month, why don’t you resign earlier?

Me: Well, I thought it'd be nice for me to teach right up to the last moment and that you'd take that into consideration in releasing me from damages.

PSC: [More laughter]

Me: [Persisting] In the entire period of the bond I only took two days of Medical Leave, and I HAD to because there was the SARS situation ... does that count for anything?

PSC: [Even more laughter]

Me: Ok ok, how much do I have to pay ...

#35 haveahacks 2009/07/28 at 8:40pm

Actually, isn't the bigger question why it is that the Civil Service needs to give quarter-million dollar pre-sign-on bonuses to entice "talent" to join it? Many other bigger (dare I say, better?) organisations are quite able to recruit talent from the market, thank you. Obviously, the civil service' ordinary HR practices are not good enough to attract, identify and retain the people that it wants. In a sense, the scholar system is an admission of failure. Which isn't to say we need to get rid of it (yet). In an ideal world, the government should be able to attract talent from the market, and scholarships should be given purely on merit without strings.

#36 caught 2009/07/28 at 8:46pm

→ relieved: Oh really? ~~Another one trying his luck to see how far his 'information' \*cough cough\*..lie..can go~~

<http://www.physicstuition.net/>

1. Imperial College London – First Class Honours Degree, 1998
2. Awarded PSC scholarship to study Physics in Imperial College, 1995
3. Junior College
  - Top 20 participants for Singapore Physics Olympiad, 1994
  - Selected for International Physics Olympiad Training, 1994
  - A for GCE 'A' Level Physics, 1994
4. Secondary School
  - Top in Physics for Sec 3 and 4, 1991 and 1992
  - A1 for GCE 'O' Level Physics, 1992

#37 caught 2009/07/28 at 8:48pm

How about one more recent lah? 2003 anyone?

How about OMS scholar Nicholas Tham my personal friend who won both the Prime Minister Book Prize and the LKY prize for Maths and Science (truly an all rounder) in his secondary school and JC days?

<http://www3.moe.edu.sg/press/2003/pr20030819.htm>

Tham Ming Qiang Nicholas, a winner in the 'A' level category, received the Lee Kuan Yew Award for Mathematics and Science in the 'O' level category and the Prime Minister's Book Prize in the 'O' level category in 2001. He has also been awarded a PSC Overseas Merit Scholarship (2003) and is currently reading Mathematics and Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

#38 caught 2009/07/28 at 9:10pm

How about another one in 1997? [http://www.pscscholarships.gov.sg/MAP/MAP\\_GAPScholarsSay.htm](http://www.pscscholarships.gov.sg/MAP/MAP_GAPScholarsSay.htm)  
1997 Overseas Merit Scholarship (Teaching) BSc in Physics, Yale University, USA

I found another. A PS who did Physics. In fact this PS went to read Physics with PSC's approval to be a soldier. <http://app.psd.gov.sg/data/PSCere01PressReleasev3.pdf>

The other two PS read Economics and Oxford's PPE respectively (ALL three read general arts and sciences).

~~Any idea what PPE is? Heard of it? Btw, you got your 'information' wrong. Did your 'friend' want to do physics and philosophy, or politics, philosophy and economics (PPE). PPE is an extremely popular course among OMS scholars and Oxford's PPE is a world renowned course, did you know that? Did you try 'physics' and 'philosophy' in your post because you thought philo is 'unsellable'?~~

No one does a science and an arts as equal disciplines. Does Oxford even allow that double degree combination? ~~Do double check your 'information' from your 'friend' first before..\*cough\* bluffi..\*cough\* here.~~

All along since it was conceived, PSC has NEVER stopped anyone from doing any subject popular by social conventions except medicine (too specialised and not applicable to public service) and business administration (for which they'll be recommended to do economics). Unless someone wanted to do astrology or something.. In fact, ~~contrary to the 'information' \*cough\* li..\*cough\* here provided by certain someone,~~ physics is a very common choice among PSC scholars as it is one of the most popular general science subjects.

In fact, PSC scholars are highly encouraged to do general arts and sciences because they believe general sciences expand the mind, is not as limited to a narrow scope of study (unless the scholar IS meant to specialise in said narrow scope ie legal service OMS scholars) and because public service and public policy formulation requires generalists' training.

Those who want to do law, and are found suitable will be offered the OMS (legal service). Only president's scholars could do medicine in the past. They altered the rule and introduced some medicine scholarship recently. They also altered the rule to allow president's scholars to do medicine in Cambridge now.

Also, if you're really so hard up to specialise in Physics all the way even as a job, and claim you wanted to be a scholar badly, you could have applied for Astar. FYI Astar was not only born in the early 2000. That was just a renaming and rebranding exercise to sexify research as a career to the scholars. It had long gone by another name previously.

#39 caught 2009/07/28 at 9:24pm

I even found a PSC scholar who did Physics in the 1980s!! He is now a Professor. Since he started his academic career in 1990 \*after finishing his eight year bond\*, he must have graduated from Cambridge in 1982! Even if he broke bond to become a lecturer immediately which I highly doubt because bondbreaking stats are very low, he would have only graduated in 1989 and was only awarded his PSC scholarship in 1985.

<http://www.science.nus.edu.sg/announcements/Science%20Lunchtime%20Talk%20-%20August%202008.pdf>

BTW, all scholarships used to be eight years. It was reduced to six years from the born-in-1978 batch of scholars onwards. :)

Anymore questions?

#40 Oikono2009/07/28 at 11:43pm

I remember meeting a SPF scholar at university who wanted to go into academia. I told him six years of work after finishing undergraduate might limit his academic options. On my part, I was luck to receive a partial scholarship from my university (in the US) and cut costs by graduating more than a year early. My masters (also in the US) was fully funded by my university and the best part is that I am now free to pursue my interests in academia, something that would not happen had I taken up a

scholarship. I never knew this would be the path I would choose post-graduation, but it still happened...and I imagine it could happen to some other student again someday.

#41 somebody 2009/07/29 at 12:28am

Just completed my 2-year bond. You are correct. I celebrated not because I could leave at last, but because I now have the freedom to do so. The feeling of liberation can't be easily-described. I do not regret the choice I made, since my 2-year scholarship was awarded in the middle of my undergraduate days, so there was sufficient time to reflect and consider the offer with some degree of information about the world around and future opportunities.

Yet others around me struggle to serve their bond; I guess because they signed the dotted line when they were 19 (and have half a decade left to serve)! Like you acknowledge, the career progression for scholars is not entirely clear if one is not in the admin service. Nobody questions when a request for a hefty scholarship budget is put up for approval, but everybody has questions when someone asks for a better staff development, training and retention programme.

That is something the civil service has to figure out. Someday, somehow. Is it possible to reduce the spending on scholarships or to divert some funds to make the work less burdensome? Perhaps there should be a more comprehensive system for developing and retaining talent? Job satisfaction is not all about money, but the scholarship system and admin service instituted by the civil service seem to suggest otherwise.

The intent of the civil service is very noble, but somehow that doesn't always translate into meaningful work. There is so much bureaucracy and red tape to cut, so many papers to write, so many bosses/departments to update, so many committees to participate in, and yet so little that is real and tangible that means a lot to the man-on-the-street... Bit of a pity really.

#42 Observer 2009/07/29 at 1:06am

I graduated from the top junior college in Singapore, with many of my friends who became various top (which means PSC) scholars. A few SAFOS, many many OMS, even two President's Scholars. I can say with certainty that 'physics wizard' is lying about 'physics' as many of my scholar friends did physics, which is a very popular subject among scholars from the science fac in JC.

If he claims to be so passionate about physics that he would allegedly not take up alleged offers from alleged agencies (this spells of passion strong enough to break boats), he'd have become an Astar scholar. Being so passionate about the sciences and somehow ending up in NUS is not a good

combination to have as science is a very R&D reliant discipline compared to say something less dynamic in evolution like law, you'd want to be in the best of the best for a subject like science and medicine.

#43 Observer 2009/07/29 at 1:40am

Another thing I'd like to add, though I am a non-scholar, I am surrounded by scholars (the real type), so let's just say I know the system intimately through so many around me:

The point about not being the master of your chartered career is moot, in that no one in the working world unless the business owners are. There is absolutely no one, in any private sector company (SME, GLC or MNC) who could tell his boss when he 1) wants to be promoted 2) dictates where he wants to go, which department, what work scope 3) how long he should stay in each posting.

I assure you that no one in a private company is entitled to tell his boss tomorrow that he wants to work in China next month. Neither do people get transferred to any place (department) of their choice. When these things ARE offered, they CAN take it up. They have no say on whether, when or how they are offered, IF AT ALL.

The main difference between a scholar (a top one, not the kucing kurap type like SGS or some private company overseas scholar) in the public sector and a 'normal' unbonded employee in a private company is that the scholar's career gets chartered and he enjoys the privilege first or/and best opportunities (because of sunk cost) and this thing in public service known as the CEP, the latter does not at all.

If you only have a 2 year bond, you're not a scholar in the scholar sense.

If you graduated from a local university, you're not a scholar in the scholar sense.

If you have some half bit teaching or healthcare job, you're probably not a scholar in the scholar sense.

There are scholars. And then there are scholars. We do all know that.

Despite the notion being a preposterous one, many of my PSC scholar friends have had their careers laid out for them in the short term. They are not AOs yet, and more than once I witnessed two of my SAFOS friends getting the postings they wanted, after they gave feedback that they were not suitable or did not like the postings they were given initially. I'm not sure if it's just because they're SAFOS that they have some bang-table privilege not as commonly enjoyed as lower rung scholars like OMS and down the line, SGS.



All of them also know what they'll be doing this year, the next, the next next, up to the next five to seven years. They are assigned mentors in the organisations, who are also scholars themselves to take care of their mental well being and

Scholarships come in different ranks and grades like everything else. So the people who accept them are inherently different.

The way you experience your journey as a 'scholar' or a scholar, depends on what scholar you are, or whether you really are one to begin with.

#44 Observer 2009/07/29 at 1:45am

Typos

\* he enjoys the privilege OF first or/and best opportunities.

\* who are also scholars themselves to take care of their mental well being and JOB SATISFACTION

Hope that helps. :)

#45 Ben 2009/07/29 at 4:18am

A strikingly fair-minded critique of bonded service from someone whom one might expect would merely grind an axe. As an American, I really appreciate the insight. Fascinating dilemma, both from an individual and governmental standpoint.

Wonderfully written. Thanks so much for sharing.

#46 Daniel 2009/07/29 at 4:27am

To be fair to some "scholars" - some of us really do like the job and we're willing to spend our younger days in it.

I'm bonded, and took a scholarship a year ago. While I guess I haven't seen much, most of the scholars in my field (SPF) stay to serve out their bonds. The work, in a way, is meaningful.

Then again, the road ahead is long and I have only just begun- but I'm quite happy to go down it.

#47 Fox 2009/07/29 at 5:38am

I will like to point out that PSC did not allow most of its scholars to undertake PhD studies. Even if you were allowed to do so, it did not mean that there would be a position guaranteed for you in NUS or NTU after you completed your PhD. You had to get the approval of the university administration to

transfer your bond obligation from PSC to the university, which is no easy task as the number of positions in the university is fixed. Furthermore, starting in the 90s, if a scholar transferred to NUS, the university had to pay PSC for the remaining bond obligation. I know that to be true because I have had a few friends who tried to transfer their bonds and they did not succeed.

If one were really interested in studying physics at a PhD level, then obviously you should not take up a PSC scholarship.

#48 nick 2009/07/29 at 9:33am

@Your Reader [Editor's Note: See #1]

very much agreed. it's one of the best pieces of writing on scholarship bonds i have read.

#49 relieved 2009/07/29 at 9:48am

@caught

caught. its perfectly fine if you disagree. i'm just glad i'm not caught, like you.

#50 blue 2009/07/29 at 10:54am

In all fairness, scholarships are wonderful opportunities for prospective students. It is also a good and effective system for the government. Scholarships aren't evil, they provided an additional option for access to tertiary education and having options in life is a luxury. However, it is important for students to think about whether a scholarship is the best choice for them. That's the whole point, students need to be able to make an informed and objective decision. But, making the decision is the hard part, different people have different agendas; JCs and teachers want to boast the number of scholars they produce, some families may emphasize on the prestige, some friends may scoff at the years "in chains". There's a lot of biased information, opinions and advise to sieve through. This article contains some very good views on having a scholarship, more students should read this. More articles/discussion like this will only benefit the students.

#51 smileys 2009/07/29 at 12:06pm

I'm a scholar myself and I'm currently in the midst of an internship to the government agency i'm bonded to. I really enjoy the work that I'm going to do, so I think for me, a scholarship is more of a career decision, rather than a sudden stroke of good fortune, akin to winning Toto, followed by a 6-year imprisonment period. If you truly are sure of what you'd want to do at aged 18/19, at least for

the first 6 years of your career, a scholarship is a win-win situation. But if you're unsure, I would suggest you think twice about being sucked into the dream of going overseas.

Being overseas has definitely opened up many possibilities for me, but having a bond has allowed me to address these possibilities realistically. Yes, I've never thought of hiking at Machu Picchu in Peru, and it is something I can definitely achieve within my years overseas. But other things like dreaming about setting up an NGO, these dreams have to be managed realistically and worked upon within my own time frame. If it can't be done, some things are perhaps best left as a dream, or something you can return to later in life.

You can't have the best of both worlds in life anyway, so just choose the best path and embark with no regrets:) All the best to those making such a decision:)

#52 caught 2009/07/29 at 1:35pm

Fox, PSC STILL DOES NOT permit PhD studies. PhD is not considered applicable to public service. For people that passionate about the science they're studying, they'd go for the Astar scholarship, as has been pointed out many times.

We were disputing someone's false claim that there was a "lack of support" for the subject he wanted to do, which he also made the mistake of saying is "physics".

Two poorly researched lies equal disaster. PSC most certainly sent countless, I dare say, scholars to do Physics in prestigious research-intensive universities all over the world.

#53 Dizzydee 2009/07/29 at 1:42pm

Hi BCYM,

Very well-written piece that echoes the thoughts of many current and former Singapore government scholars. As a former scholar who committed the crime of breaking his bond, my views are probably a little coloured. But I agree that while the facts and circumstances of the bond were made known to us, it is also true that there was a heavy marketing campaign to "brainwash" us from 16/17 onwards. OK, perhaps its our own fault for being so easily swayed – I was a sucker. That said, it was always my understanding that you could get out of a PSC or other stat board or GLC bond by paying it all back with a penalty – it was only after people actually started breaking bonds in worrying numbers that Philip Yeo changed the rules and took to naming and shaming bond-breakers and ranting about moral integrity.

The other question to consider is whether it's really the best for Singapore to have the majority of its "best and brightest" in the civil service at all. I think it's sub-optimal for a number of reasons. Firstly, a country and its economy are made up of different parts of which government and its affiliated organs are but one part (although in Singapore the proportion is arguably higher than most other countries!). You want the talent to be spread around so they are in banking, law, teaching, engineering, consumer businesses, manufacturing, etc. Secondly, for the most part the civil service is not about policy-making but rather policy implementation. At the highest levels important decisions do get taken which have tremendous impact on the country, and it's important that these get made by able people. But for the most part the majority of scholars end up in dead-end jobs doing endless paperwork. Many of my scholar friends who have remained bonded complain about their minds "wasting away". So while I agree that you need a small number of highly talented people in government for the good of our country, diverting a large number into the civil service to ensure there is such a pool to choose from seems somewhat wasteful. Instead, we should make it easier for top civil servants and government ministers to be drawn from outside the civil service. Indeed, that would probably make for a more balanced government, or at least one which is more in touch with reality. Reducing the number of scholars would also take away the need to find a place for them once they are done with their bonds and are not deemed worthy of further elevation – up until now the preferred strategy seems to be to dump them into GLCs or stat boards at senior levels even though they have no prior relevant experience or the appropriate skill set.

OK, that's enough griping from me.

Cheers,

D.

#54 caught 2009/07/29 at 1:45pm

~~relieved, are you sure you weren't 'caught'? haha! You may like to know I'm not bonded, but I sure can spot BS from a mile.~~

~~For the clarity of everyone else who may be distracted by the cacophony of prevarications and untruths due to insidious personal agendas...here's the lowdown.~~

Only truth stand up to scrutiny

-PSC most certainly does not prohibit scholars from doing the major popular general sciences, arts subjects. That is an outright lie, as exposed above. Those who want to do law can state their interest,

if found suitable will be offered OMS (Legal Service), these people work in the AG Chambers and MinLaw.

- PhD does NOT sponsor studies for its scholars up to PhD level. That is confirmed chop plus guaranteed. In fact, PSC mandates 4 years for SAFOS/OMS scholars to finish up, 5 years for those who go to a non-English speaking country for their master's and 6 years for those who go to a non-English speaking country for both their undergrad and master's.

You can do as many degrees as you wish, during that time frame, on their expense, depending on the size of your brains. There was a PSC/SAFOS scholar who did a PhD and his undergrad in that four years.

- Anyone who wants to do PhD (and hence be a researcher – for which a PhD's value is most extensively harnessed) would have APPLIED for the Astar Scholarship. Before the early 2000, Astar scholarship was known as National Science Scholarship, something like that.

No excuses such as "I want to do PhD so can't apply", or "I want to do physics, and can't apply \*bigger joke\*"

~~If you didn't get in, just say so! Don't be so thick skinned. There is nothing wrong with being a reject. Over 2500 people are rejected every year.~~

#55 amused (same IP as "caught" #54) 2009/07/29 at 2:01pm

Dizzydee, what do you mean by "once they are done with their bonds and are not deemed worthy of further elevation"

Do you mean you think a sponsor pays for a scholar it cherry picked out, so that he can enjoy the 6 years of his service? Is that what you think? LOL this is the funniest thing I have ever heard!

If he only wants a work horse he uses as a normal employee for 6 years, he will hire the farmer graduates who come out of NUS/NTU/SMU every year.

All organisations, even the private ones who don't do much for their scholars compared to PSC that treat theirs like kings, talent pick and then sponsor a scholar's education and other needs as part of a talent-grooming exercise for their leadership preparation. To get the maximum of his ROI (return of investment), any organisation even the private ones groom their scholars for top and leadership positions.

Your one single line alone destroyed all credibility in your post because it's completely at odds with what we know. The only time any form of sponsorship is used just to fill a position is the thousands of local study awards given out to people to study in local universities. Those are meant to fill rank and file positions for a purely menial HR need.

~~May I know what was your scholarship, from which organisation it's from? I'm guessing you're one of those local study awardees who think you're a scholar.~~

#56 relieved 2009/07/29 at 4:38pm

[@caught](#)

caught. i didnt even bother applying. cos i didnt want to have to be faced with these issues scholars are facing.

i know i'm a free man. are you? you seem to have aced all your exams but i have my doubts on whether or not you are able to pass on the appropriate knowledge and values to your students. Wouldn't you be mocking the majority of the singapore's students who do not fall under the scholar category? And if thats true, what makes the majority of students who are not scholars inferior to you? jsut because they didnt get a scholarship?

maybe ignorance is bliss.

#57 Fox 2009/07/29 at 6:17pm

[@amused](#)

"Anyone who wants to do PhD (and hence be a researcher – for which a PhD's value is most extensively harnessed) would have APPLIED for the Astar Scholarship. Before the early 2000, Astar scholarship was known as National Science Scholarship, something like that.

No excuses such as "I want to do PhD so can't apply", or "I want to do physics, and can't apply \*bigger joke\*""

Actually, the joke is on you.

The annual number of undergraduate scholarships given out by NSTB, the predecessor of A\*STAR, for studying science is countable with the fingers on one hand. It was considerably more selective than OMS, SAFOS, etc.

Back in the dark ages (i.e. mid to late 1990s), most people who really wanted to do a PhD in the sciences and had weighed their options carefully would have avoided any kind of public organization scholarships.

#58 Fox 2009/07/29 at 6:28pm

@caught,

"Fox, PSC STILL DOES NOT permit PhD studies. PhD is not considered applicable to public service. For people that passionate about the science they're studying, they'd go for the Astar scholarship, as has been pointed out many times."

Actually, they did for exceptional cases in the past. Prof. Alfred Huan of NTU was allowed to do his MPhil and PhD at Oxford immediately after his undergrad degree. That was in the early or mid eighties, if I remember correctly. PSC might have closed off the option after him.

In the 90s, when the write of the article, Ms. Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, wrote the article, A-level school leavers who wanted to study science to the PhD level had very few options, apart from the NSTB scholarships. Even then, preference was given for subjects of 'industrial and national interests'.

#59 Fox 2009/07/29 at 6:46pm

Correction. The last paragraph should read:

In the 90s, when the writer of the article, Ms. Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, was awarded her scholarship, A-level school leavers who wanted to study science to the PhD level had very few options, apart from the NSTB scholarships. Even then, preference was given for subjects of 'industrial and national interests'.

#60 regina 2009/07/29 at 10:19pm

I do not see a SINGLE comment containing the word gratitude or the word grateful.

I took a scholarship to go to Oxford in 1994. I served a 8 year bond from 1998 to 2006. I could not have afforded to go to Oxford if there was no scholarship. The scholarship gave me a chance, an option. I had a wonderful time in Oxford. I am so very very grateful I had a chance to go. The scholarship provided a miracle that for once, even if you had no money, you could have your dream come true. We were not poor. We were middleclass. but we didn't have \$250,000 lying around.

Yes, there was a bond. But many things in life require commitment. Marriage is commitment, having a child is commitment. Being friends is also commitment. Commitment means doing what is right, sticking with what you said you would do, even when you don't feel like it. People change, of course

they do... whether or not they go overseas. But they still have their commitments. Dont blame it on the marketing.

If you turned back time, and asked me if i would take on the scholarship if i knew i would be unhappy for the 8 year bond, i would still say yes. In a heartbeat.

#61 quitacet 2009/07/30 at 12:00am

Thanks for sharing. I look forward to your new book.

I also second comment #35. You're all looking at this the wrong way, as if the policy was actually intended to be fair or efficient. So many comments are about how it is neither. The right question is cui bono?

#62 undergrad student 2009/07/27 at 7:16am

Hi,

Thank you for your article. I am an undergraduate currently studying at an American university. Coming from a 'prestigious' Junior College, applying to scholarships was the norm for most of my classmates. However, I was adamant (or you could say stubborn) enough to not be caught up in that flurry. Although that means spending thousands of money, I thought that it would be worth the experience. In fact, I remember telling my parents that I would get a loan if they could not pay.

In retrospect, that was perhaps too naive of me to underestimate the difficulty of forking out such large sums of money. However, till today I have not regretted my decision. First of all, I knew that getting a government scholarship was not suitable for me, especially emotionally. Now, I love Singapore, but I could not see myself working for an organisation that I am reluctant to work with, nor could I imagine myself being comfortable with the lack of freedom that signing the bond entails. 6 years may not be much for some, but these are perhaps the most important years of one's career. The purpose of university education is to allow one to discover himself and what he would like to do in his life. Forcing someone to make that decision in the tender age of 18 is rather unreasonable and unrealistic.

Sure, with the current economy in demise, it may be nice for some to think that they have a stable job fresh out of college. They need not worry about preparing for job interviews, going to career fairs, perfecting resumes, or even taking a simple personality test to try figure out what career fits them. However, from my experience so far, a large part of learning comes from taking the time to consider your own career path and life. I do not know very well my path ahead, but I have some idea of a plan. I



have been quite lucky so far, but I don't know whether they will work out. Still, I believe I would find a way if they don't. My future is filled with uncertainty, and together with that, excitement and independence. I have all the freedom to go where I want to go. And that, I believe, is worth any price. I hope all graduates out there considering a government scholarship would be able to read your article.

#63 j 2009/07/30 at 12:23am

It bugs me that people are missing the point.

@Annie: It's not that the scholarship can't make some people happy. Of course it can, when your interests are aligned with your job scope. But if it doesn't, it limits your options. At some point or other, we have to make choices and close off some options, but is 19 the right age to do it?

@regina: The scholarship is not a gift, that one should be grateful for it. It is an economic deal – you accept money in exchange for an enforced commitment. As with any deal, some questions that should be asked are: is it a good deal? is the deal as good as the other guy makes it sound?

You cite several examples of commitment. I note that the decision to enter into such commitments usually takes time – time to consider whether one can afford the commitment, whether one will enjoy the commitment, and whether there are other options. When people jump into commitments without careful thought, they are generally frowned upon (e.g. hasty marriages, or accidental babies.) The issue here is that 19-y.o.s may not have the maturity to consider the bond commitment adequately, and perhaps society should do more to educate them on it.

#64 heh 2009/07/30 at 12:47am

So the blogger didn't become like Clara Lim-Tan, Eugenia Tan, Tan Wei Lan and Liew Wei Li. The youngest teachers to be appointed principals in their mid 30s. They're OMS (teaching) scholars like her. Welcome to the rat race.

Those who think they are not cut out to run, don't join the race please. LKY himself has given a famous quote that out of 10 president's scholars, he needs only a couple of hits. His idea is to recruit a pool of scholars every year, and out of that if they have a 50%, 40% or 30% hit rate, it's all they need to fill their leadership positions. In other words, both parties hold no illusion that every scholar recruited is the right fit.

To current serving scholars, if you feel the rat race is not right for you, leave when you finish. Even if you don't, chances are your lack of interest is evident and barely veiled, which signals to your bosses that you may as well be gone.

So basically, if you don't fit in, just leave. It's no different from any unbonded employee who leaves his job after some time, and don't we see people leaving their jobs all the time? There really isn't a science to this. Some unbonded employees who enjoy their time and do well, stay in the organisation as well.

Why do some scholars go on to these positions at a young age, while a minority like the blogger who refuse to take part in the competitive rat race fall out and leave? the answer is simple. It's fit. The people with no interest for the rat race will simply not feel the motivation to compete or participate.

#65 alastair 2009/07/30 at 12:49am

Great post, but no one is asking the most imp't question:

How does a 19-year old truly know what he /she wants in life?

If its a process, when does the moment come when that person finally realises that this is what he / she wants?

Curiously,

A 19-year old

#66 heh 2009/07/30 at 12:55am

[Fox](#) :

Correction. The last paragraph should read:

In the 90s, when the writer of the article, Ms. Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, was awarded her scholarship, A-level school leavers who wanted to study science to the PhD level had very few options, apart from the NSTB scholarships. Even then, preference was given for subjects of 'industrial and national interests'.

We are not talking about Ms Yu Mei. We were talking about the trumpet blower who called him/herself 'physics wizard' claiming to be one of the 'top' RJC students and claiming that the only thing separating him/her from a PSC scholarship was his/her intention to do physics. Neither did he/she say anything about doing physics at a PhD level. He/she merely claimed that PSC disallowed him/her to do physics at undergrad level for scholarship application, which is a big lie. I have at least one dozen PSC friends who did Physics!

There is a loophole in your analysis of NSTB for 'physics wizard': 'physics wizard' says he/she is still currently in university, which means at the 'earliest' it was only four years ago when he/she could apply for a 'scholarship' with his 'high achieving friends' who did so. A\*star was formed way before that, in 2002 or 2003. The 'wizard' did not graduate "that many years ago" as claimed. Your information on NSTB applies to Yu Mei's cohort but not 'physics wizard'.

#67 heh 2009/07/30 at 1:14am

Alastair, I think it depends on the individual.

My brother knew what he wanted at 19 – to be a pilot – and committed to it. He still loves what he does now.

I personally find it shocking when people say 19 is 'too young' to know what you mean or be held responsible for your actions.

Scholarships are not the only thing that requires a student to decide what he wants to be. Deciding and applying for a course like medicine that takes 5 years of study and is so narrow in specialty that almost all graduates go on to do it for the rest of their lives (how often do you see a middle aged doctor doing a career switch, compared to middle aged lawyers which is more common) is also done at 19. If students all over the world can make such decisions at 19, it is not young and no big deal.

Every single person you see around working as engineers, accountants, lawyers ALL made the decision at 19, because that's when they applied.

~~So people like that allan ooi loser, stop blaming others or play 'aggrieved victim' when you were just a cowardly, gutless and irresponsible loser who didn't have the wits or character to take responsibility for your actions. People like this make me sick.~~

Rule of thumb: If you have a flippant or flighty personality, best not to commit anything and not just scholarship, but anything at all. Not at 19. Not at 25. Not until you grow up. Just waste away and fritter around because chances are you'll change your mind, wasting more time, that is if you didn't fail and drop out of the race before that.

#68 haha (same IP as 'heh' #67) 2009/07/30 at 1:23am

[@Fox](#)

[Fox](#) :

@amused

"Anyone who wants to do PhD (and hence be a researcher – for which a PhD's value is most extensively harnessed) would have APPLIED for the Astar Scholarship. Before the early 2000, Astar scholarship was known as National Science Scholarship, something like that.

No excuses such as "I want to do PhD so can't apply", or "I want to do physics, and can't apply \*bigger joke\*""

Actually, the joke is on you.

The annual number of undergraduate scholarships given out by NSTB, the predecessor of A\*STAR, for studying science is countable with the fingers on one hand. It was considerably more selective than OMS, SAFOS, etc.

Back in the dark ages (i.e. mid to late 1990s), most people who really wanted to do a PhD in the sciences and had weighed their options carefully would have avoided any kind of public organization scholarships.

~~What a fool.~~ Two factors are involved in selectivity, beside supply, the other is DEMAND. You know that bedfellow of supply that J1 kids know about? Going by your theory, 3rd rate scholarships offered by places like IRAS and PUB, which number only 2-3 every year due to the size of their needs, must be super selective, coveted, prestigious and oh more selective than President's Scholarship and OMS.

~~If someone sold you very limited quantities of cr\*p (defecation), like say 3 small pieces, they become Gold to you. Hahahahhahaa~~

#69 heh 2009/07/30 at 2:07am

"You cite several examples of commitment. I note that the decision to enter into such commitments usually takes time – time to consider whether one can afford the commitment, whether one will enjoy the commitment, and whether there are other options. When people jump into commitments without careful thought, they are generally frowned upon (e.g. hasty marriages, or accidental babies.) The issue here is that 19-y.o.s may not have the maturity to consider the bond commitment adequately, and perhaps society should do more to educate them on it" [Editor's Note: Reference to 'J' , #63]

Pls refer to my post about commitment and maturity required of 19 year olds for majority of occupations out there that people still hold. If an American student has to decide to do pre-med at 19, majority of the 30, 40, 50, 60 year old doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers walking around now

also decided at 19 because that's when they applied. There might have been more adult students who went to college at 26 years old in the 1950s post war period. Not so much nowadays.

Commitment (and responsibility) is doing something you may not necessarily enjoy and it speaks of your character and conviction. Like having a good attitude to NS that's one example. A sense of responsibility separates the winners from the losers. Those do what is right because it counts and those who take the path of least resistance. Commitment and responsibility is not doing what you want or hanging on a hammock in Bahamas. And something is not a responsibility when it doesn't require anything out of you, it is not much of a commitment is there?

It's like having faith and being strong when times are fabulous and your life is peachy. Or suddenly conjuring faith after God appears to you and says hi. What is it worth? Nothing.

#70 j 2009/07/30 at 4:00am

"If an American student has to decide to do pre-med at 19, majority of the 30, 40, 50, 60 year old doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers walking around now also decided at 19 because that's when they applied."

They don't have to decide to do pre-med at 19; they can, but they don't have to. Premed is just a set of required courses — if you decide you want try for med school sometime later, you can go back to college / stay longer in college to complete the requirements. Likewise, you can complete premed and not try for medical school, with no real disadvantage. The commitment required here is far less than that required for bonded scholarships. US law schools don't even have such specific requirements; almost any bachelor's would do. In general the US has a far more flexible system than we do.

Nonetheless, the commitment — or lack thereof — presently required of 19yos here or elsewhere has little bearing on what should be required of them. How 'informed' is their consent — do they know what options they are closing off? Chances are they discover other options or other interests when they actually go over, which entices them to break they bond (if they can).

This is not about the moral fibre of the people chafing at their bonds. There will always be difficulties to endure and overcome; the question is if it is really necessary for them to endure those particular difficulties. Winning a battle is great, but avoiding it is usually better. No point being garang for its own sake.

#71 Fox 2009/07/30 at 5:23am

@heh

"There is a loophole in your analysis of NSTB for 'physics wizard': 'physics wizard' says he/she is still currently in university, which means at the 'earliest' it was only four years ago when he/she could apply for a 'scholarship' with his 'high achieving friends' who did so."

Where does it say that he/she is currently in university?

"What a fool. Two factors are involved in selectivity, beside supply, the other is DEMAND. You know that bedfellow of supply that J1 kids know about?"

This shows that you know nothing about how the NSTB scholarships are awarded or what the calibre of the people who were awarded the scholarships was.

Homework 1: Compare the universities which OMS scholars go to and the universities NSTB undergrad scholars went to.

Homework 2: What was the most important criterion for getting the NSTB scholarship? More importantly, who were the kind of people who applied?

I was in the top Sec 4 GEP class in RI (when Wijey was still the headmaster). SAFOS and OMS scholars are dime a dozen to me. I know a couple of NSTB scholars. To the best of my knowledge, the academic A-level result of the average NSTB scholar is significantly better than that of the average OMS or SAFOS scholar. I realize that of course that my sampling of NSTB scholars is poor but that is only because there are so few of them.

#72 mimi 2009/07/30 at 8:24am

I am appalled at the attached image- Advertisement inviting students to apply for the Ministry of Education Teaching Scholarship, (Straits Times, 6 March 2009)

Its fake and unreal. The article is another method of advertising as well. There are better ways to represent educated Singaporean in high important positions. We do not experience winter in Singapore or does a normal person able to wear such to work in an everyday situation!

Also at the same time, I am appalled to how Singapore bonds all scholars down. Singaporeans unfortunately have the worst Bonded expectations when it comes to govt scholarship which is only for the top 5% anyways, so why bother? I know that bonded people are required to come back straight to

Singapore on the day they finished their exams overseas and MUST report to the bonded organisation the next day ( or 3 days)to start work.

I find that filthy and evil. If you want to give a way scholarship- give it with pride and support. Not try and make every single of your dollar worth it so.

Where's the sincerity in giving?

And if you break the bond, you would have to pay all the money that was once 'loaned' to you full amount and with interest. You are basically entrapped for that period of time, if you wish to leave earlier with no other options.

In the Western World, scholarships are given with honour and belief that you deserve it. You are not neither bonded nor theres a need to repay if you decided to quit halfway. That my friends is sincerity in charity which does not exist in singapore.

Probably the only scholarship I know which is bondless in Singaproe is from the Lee Foundation. If there are actually more around. KUDOS.

(PS: And the govt still wonder why some people just dont come back to Singapore after studying overseas)

#73 mimi 2009/07/30 at 8:32am

Cant believed they made you take a freaking mental test at Woodbridge- What a disgrace to the human mental capacity.

Its like as if you are a soviet athlete in the Communistic World.

Ps: appologies for the typos at the top in teh previous comment!

good luck everyone – coming from prestigious education institution, getting high distinctions, working at the best organisation and earning top dollar is worth nothing if you are not in your happiest state of being alive and love your job.

You all can call me a sullen person for all I care- but I am real. Get on with the program.

#74 Daniel 2009/07/30 at 9:39am

I applaud the author for the fact that she served her bond out, to the last day "and then some". She understands how to settle the score between whim & responsibility.

For all those other commenters out here in this comment box who see fit to gripe about the “way the Singapore govt ensnares the scholars with the bond”, and even more so to those who broke their bonds (\*gasp\*): be not mistaken, the govt scholarships are NOT ‘charity’, and in no instance have they ever said so. They are TRANSACTIONS. Ever study economics? This is buying & selling. The scholars have sold off those years of their lives. What happens in the market if the merchant doesn’t deliver on (advance) payment? In some cases, simply refunding the cash, with interest even, won’t cut it. The merchant may be taken to court on breach of trust, breach of contract etc. None of us would fail to deliver to our clients, why then do some people think they have the right to ‘quit’ on the govt?

You think the goal of the govt giving those scholarships is to earn interest on them when the scholars break their bonds? That’s merely a deterrent, along with the public humiliation. They honestly want those bright minds to work for the public sector. And for those of you comfortable rich who took the scholarships not for the money but for the prestige, i’ll have you know that some of us really would not be able to afford the overseas education otherwise. The govt is hence empowering those who need to be trained, to be trained. And it’s still not charity.

Oh the irony – among the top in junior college, receiving the best educations overseas for so many years, then coming back (or not) and breaking their bonds. Thereby revealing the truth of their immaturity. Still childish, still selfish.

#75 anonymous 2009/07/30 at 9:48am

@heh

Fox’s contention with amused was that scholarship opportunities for PhD seekers were limited. Whether or not NSTB was ‘selective’ or ‘prestigious’, whatever those words mean to you, is beside the point. Try putting some clothes on your straw man next time. It might fool the kids at least.

#76 anonymous 2009/07/30 at 10:05am

@Daniel

Immature? Childish?

Is it not like you described, nothing more than a business transaction? If a student deems paying off the bond, together with the interest and what you call ‘public humiliation’, as being worth the utility he/she gains from whatever alternative the choice entails, then where is the wrong in that? On the contrary, it takes a certain level of maturity to see a scholarship as a hedge against future uncertainty, and utilize it as such.



Of course, you may not think so, because you ascribe infinite utility to nebulous words like 'responsibility' and 'character', etc. But just because someone doesn't have the same utility function as you doesn't make them 'childish'.

#77 ignorant 2009/07/30 at 10:32am

The "mental" test is actually a psychometric test no different to tests like MBTI and other psychological tests on the market. PSC does require a consultation with a psychologist (I'm not sure if it's held at Woodbridge today) not to find out if you had any psychological disorder but to find out if you're mentally suitable for the public service. In any case if they're going to pay 400k for your education I think it's perfectly reasonable if they want to find out if there's any indication that you're going to go berserk... Friends who have gone through the psychological assessment tell me that it's no more than a friendly chat (albeit a long chat) with some person and it's not like they send electric waves through your brain to "brainwash" you...

Mimi – advertisements, whether in the private or public sector, work to deceive you anyway. You're not "lovin" Macdonald's when it's giving you heart failure or cholesterol problems nor does wearing an Adidas tracksuit make you feel that "Impossible is Nothing". That's marketing for you.

Also, bonded people are not FORCED to come back the day their exams end. I'm studying overseas currently and know quite a few graduates who're coming back to serve their bond. Some have just started while some haven't even started yet despite their graduation being more than a month ago. The various agencies tend to give some grace period for you to pack up your stuff, attend your graduation ceremonies, travel a little etc. and then come back to serve your bond.

As for the fact that scholars need to repay their bond when they break it – this is obviously only fair. If not you will see countless of scholars never returning to serve their bond and the government will obviously make a loss given that they spend 3-400k per scholar. To expect that to happen is just completely unreasonable. In the western world, many private companies indeed do give sponsorships to students but definitely not on as large a scale as PSC does. Also, these are generally given for local studies which is significantly cheaper than overseas rates for obvious reasons. In addition, many of those being sponsored have worked for these companies for 6 months – 1 year during their gap year (so perhaps in a way you can say they've served their bond). As for universities which give out bondless scholarships – many of these universities are private and receive endowment and donations from their alumni (take Yale for instance).

Singapore does have a few bondless scholarships – all the local universities do, Loke Cheng Kim (for overseas and probably local), Lee Foundation etc. Jardine also offers bondless scholarships to Oxford

and Cambridge (although this is not just for Singaporeans). If you don't want a bond, then go apply for one of those. No one is stopping you.

While I think the writer makes a fair and insightful point, one also needs to realise that no one (except maybe your parents) forces anyone to take up a scholarship. Plenty of people choose to go overseas on their own money (or take up university scholarships) or simply stay locally if they can't afford to go overseas. Furthermore, the terms of the contract will not change throughout your study period though you might have. Perhaps at 19 you don't quite know what you're doing nor know who you really are – but that is simply the RISK you're taking. There is not a single person in the world who can guarantee that signing the deed is the absolute right decision because it simply depends on the individual. To believe that PSC or whichever other agency is guaranteeing you a happy, successful, high-paying career is just naive. What they can guarantee you is that, barring your failure to meet the required grades and other extraordinary circumstances, they will pay for your education overseas – a luxury that many people (including those in the western world) cannot afford. I've heard of some scholars who hate their jobs, but at the end of the day, many admit that without the scholarship, they would never have been able to go overseas to study – and that is something they treasure as the best days of their lives... And let's not forget that there IS an exit strategy (if you can afford it)...

As for the girl who chose to take up a govt scholarship rather than a bondless scholarship... She made the choice, it's her life, and given that she talked to the writer, she knows full well the (possibly) consequences of her decision. At 19, you're no longer that ignorant. Especially for someone intelligent enough to have obtained a scholarship...

Sorry for the longwindedness. The phone conversation with the PSC is hilarious.

#78 Kai 2009/07/30 at 10:48am

Excellent article. You write beautifully.

I too was at the brink just two years ago and, for reasons which I have yet to discover, decided not to pursue a government scholarship (or any other for that matter). Perhaps it was a combination of laziness and a general disdain for the civil service that drove me to that decision, but in the end it was an admittedly hard time for me, as my friends who did were heaped with accolades and ceremonies, while I continued to languish in the corrosive obscurity of conscription.

Yet, for all that, I have come to realise that freedom, however large a price one pays for it, is indeed a precious thing. Is it worth the exorbitant amounts of money one has to fork out to pay for one's own overseas education? That I cannot say with certainty for everyone, and to be fair to the government,

one could say that without these scholarships, there would be many more instances of talented, bright people who would not have had the chance of a lifetime to study abroad.

Sure, one could gun for a private scholarship, but with the government giving out (if i'm not mistaken) the bulk of scholarships, the absence of the latter would certainly be felt. Perhaps it isn't so much the scholarship itself, but the deliberate hard-selling of it by the government. Potential scholars have only been told about the merits and of course, the immense prestige, that go with it. Yet a six-year bond is no small amount of time, especially after one has undergone one's formative years.

What price freedom?

#79 TIA 2009/07/30 at 11:25am

I really appreciate this article and the comments. Every Singaporean should read this. The issues scholars face are short term. The issues civil servants face are long term. The policy makers need to work harder. I represent the parents.

#80 Sandy 2009/07/30 at 11:38am

Well done. I am glad you're sharing this. I am also a teaching scholar. It seemed like a good choice four years ago. Although I still like to share my knowledge with students, I have found other loves in the university. And it is sobering to know that you have an obligation.

I have already heard "be realistic" speech.

I don't have regrets because knowing what I knew then, it was the best decision.

#81 rhine 2009/07/30 at 11:57am

I think many are missing the point here. The money that is being used to fund your high life and overseas studies, the same amount of money that can fund many other local graduates, are paid for by tax-payers. while at 19 years old, it may be fair to say that you do not know what you are in for, you would at least have known that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Hindsight of re-looking at your deed is not going to get you anywhere nor get the taxpayers money worth.

I am sorry that you are a square peg in a round hole, but you might have been square nevertheless with or without the scholarship.

I have heard enough of scholars who cannot even write a simple CV or ever have to eat the humble pie of having the doors slammed in your face the way we did when we go for work interviews. We are

the mundane ones who have to fight tooth and nail for our livelihood. We don't feed on taxpayers' money and our parents aren't that rich either.

But it is through such life experiences, humbling and maybe even humiliating that the squareness in us becomes rounded. And hence we learn to better appreciate what we have, and enjoy our lives better.

You win some, you lose some. Be fair – would you be who you are without the scholarship. We cannot have our cake and eat it – something has to give.

Get real and I wish you all the best for your bond-free status...

#82 anonymous 2009/07/30 at 4:42pm

Gratitude? Commitment? How very sentimental. What is your price for it? A transaction occurs because both parties recognize greater than or equal utility in the goods they are receiving than the goods they are giving up. Why make a commitment if it's so hard to maintain? Obviously one sees that the utility gained from the returns are worth the utility lost through the effort.

In taking on the commitment, one has set up a balance of utilities. The utility of future returns net of the disutility of maintaining the commitment up to a certain point in time and utility of an alternative path net of the disutility of reneging on the commitment at the same point in time. But these utilities are given by time-dependent functions, as information becomes less imperfect. What if at some point in time the net utility of choosing the alternative path grows more than or equal to that of staying within the commitment? The agent would have to be deluded to choose to stay.

Where do 'commitment' and 'gratitude' come into play here? To some people they result in an infinite disutility from self-penalty after getting out of the commitment, so that the net utility from an alternate path can never outweigh the net utility of staying. But that's fine. We are all irrational at some time or another. The problem is that they expect everyone else to have the same utility function.

#83 Nick 2009/07/30 at 7:18pm

The thing about scholars like yourself is: you whine, lament and blame others for the predicament that you are in or you have suffered through. Your tone says that you hated those years in the service but out of obligation, you completed the bond. You complain about "lost opportunities" and how an overseas scholarship has changed your outlook and make you yearn for other things in life. You imply that the government as a sprawling bureaucracy stifled talented people like yourself, and you would have wished others not repeat the path taken.

From your writing I could tell that you are definitely a talented individual and capable of great things. But what you have not done despite your experience and talent is: you simply have not suggested any viable alternatives to the current system. There is not a single paragraph where you say – look, this is not working and this is what I propose that we should go forward with. I admit your piece was very well written, very moving and personal. But without constructive suggestions the piece became just another time-wasting, self-pitying work that we hear of all the time.

#84 regina 2009/07/30 at 7:43pm

yes. Gratitude and commitment. I disagree with poster 81 [Editor's Note: #82] that these are sentimental. i think he sounds like a typical economist, believing everything has a price. I hope i never think like that.

i reiterate, without govt scholarships, i would not have been able to go overseas. there was NO WAY. dont think any bank would have given me a personal loan for that amount. the scholarship was the ONLY way if i wanted to go. And I am GRATEFUL there was this option. i am grateful i could choose to take up the option or not to take up the option. Isnt it better than having no option?

I want to say THANK YOU to the URA, which gave me that scholarship.

#85 anonymous 2009/07/30 at 11:26pm

[@regina](#)

What is a price but simply a rate of return that two parties agree on for a fair exchange of goods? Colloquially, if an item doesn't have a price, it means that the seller will not let it go regardless of what the buyer offers in exchange. In other words, the seller's utility from that good is infinite. But wait, isn't that exactly the possibility that I admitted in my previous post?

Sure, maybe such things don't have a price for you. No problem. I didn't say you were going to hell for it. But perhaps there is a price for it to some others. An apple-lover is going to price a nice juicy Fuji way more than an apple-hater. Maybe it's the last Fuji left and he wouldn't let it go for the world. Fine. Think the apple-hater would react the same way? No? Fine.

And since I've already recognized from the beginning that there's no price for gratitude to you, there really isn't any need to try and convince me how valuable it is to you.

[@Nick](#)

The point of the essay wasn't to tell people the system is broke. I think most people agree on that, whether it is true or not. The author seems more concerned with giving an insider's perspective of life

as a scholar. Granted, it is a biased piece of work, but can still serve to highlight some issues that prospective scholars and their parents should think about before entering into the contract. It is only an exercise in futility to those who are not eligible for or have already decided not to take up a scholarship.

#86 Yeo Jia Tian 2009/07/30 at 11:33pm

Humble local scholar here. You win some, you lose some. Life is about choices, and taking responsibility for those choices, whether or not reality matches up to our expectations.

I taught for 3 years. Including the 1 year at NIE, I stayed for almost exactly the length of my bond, and I quit when the period was up. The ironic thing was, I liked teaching. I liked my subject. Work was tough, but I was having fun too. Problem was, a lot of people around me thought I was 'wasted' where I am. Being a local scholar and attaining good results doesn't automatically translate into career opportunities.

There's a bigger world out there, and I thought I'd try to step out a bit. At the LKY School for Public Policy now, and maybe I'm just crazy enough to go back to the education sector when I've finished...

One thing the various scholarship offices can do for future scholarship applicants is to invite people such as us for talks with the selected applicants, where we'd point out the very things that can push/pull us out of the service, the pros and cons instead of the unrelenting optimism we see. What you did with your former student is something I've done as well, and they should encourage all those taking the plunge, so to speak, consider these factors. Maybe it's my own bias, but former teaching scholars seem rather well suited for this role.

Then when reality sets in for these scholars, they can't claim ignorance.

#87 Daniel 2009/07/31 at 12:02am

Would just like to clarify- the Daniel in comments #84 and #73 is another Daniel from the one who commented in #46... just got an email with the title "wtf??!?" from a friend who's also involved in this thread. She thought it was me...

On another note, Thailand's King's Scholarship doesn't require its scholars to work for the government, but merely to return to Thailand to "contribute". A number of them do return to the civil service, but others go into other sectors such as the academia, business, NGO work... "contributing" in other ways beyond the civil service.

Is that a better compromise?

#88 Wong Sheau Ying 2009/07/31 at 12:56am

Thank you for articulating what I have thought for very long, and articulating it so well. I was a PSC Teaching Scholar and I understand that “precious, precious feeling” you wrote about, deeply and keenly. I fled the system when it became clear that I was not the sort of person the establishment preferred, but liked to exploit for what I could do (at the time, it seemed I was valuable for winning SYF Gold medals for them, but not good enough to promote). Like you, I served an additional year after the bond was completed and it made all the difference in the world to know I could leave, but I didn’t because I loved my students. In the end, Tina Turner was right, because “what’s love got to do with it?”

What struck me in your writing was the fear that you wrote about, when people got to thinking about leaving the system. I heard tell, from my ‘higher up’s” that “life was harder OUT THERE”. I’m out here now, have been for five years and what I’ve discovered is this: OUT HERE is only tough for people who have little to show in talent or drive. It is disturbing then to think, going from this insight which could very well be erroneous and certainly offensive to some, that the civil service is staffed by some people who are afraid of what lies outside.

#89 Lee Chee Wai 2009/07/31 at 4:07am

Thanks for the really well-written and reflective article. I myself, am in free-fall right now, for once in my adult life of not really knowing what I would do or where I would be after I complete this Phd. I’ll admit I am scared but the US has conditioned me to the idea that opportunities are created and available as and when you seek them. I will find my way somehow.

Regina #83 – in your case, it is a matter of sequencing (and your choice of a major). I did my undergraduate and masters studies at NUS Computer Science. As I had (then) a strong desire to enter academics, I applied to graduate schools in the US. I took a risk to enter without funding, with reasonable expectation that I could pick up an RAship or TAship (Bond Free!) with the University. Within a few weeks of arriving, I got an RAship and money was never an issue from then on.

Gratitude towards your benefactor is one thing, but it does not mean allowing the “benefactor” to place you in a state of unhappiness for an extended period of time with no choice. Breaking the bond was the legal choice, but after Philip Yeo made it a “sin” to do so, an outsider like myself can only wonder if a bond was in fact an article of servitude ... even one for which a scholar was initially grateful. I, for one, am extremely glad I “failed” to pick up any scholarships back when I was a desperate hungry 19 year-old.

#90 Ronald 2009/07/31 at 2:05pm

Ms Bala,

I remember you starting out as a teacher when I was a JC student ten years ago. I empathise a lot with your essay, though I must imagine that your days spent in Northwestern were so profoundly life-changing that you are thankful for it, despite the difficult 8 years that subsequently followed. Congratulations on your release from bond-hood.

In those days, I was perhaps lucky to have been one of those deemed "not good enough" for an overseas scholarship – i never made it past the second round for any interview. Had I made it through the process, my 19-year-old self would have locked myself into the system – not knowing that I would change, and not knowing if I could make meaning out of a subsequent career as some friends have, and many haven't.

I took a family-financially-pinching Father-Mother scholarship one to a liberal arts college that set me on a path in pursuit of an ideal (architecture). Freedom comes at a cost, and I conscious that not everybody had the privilege I had – to study overseas, to know what to do with my life, to be set on the path to explore the world and fulfill my fullest potential.

Looking back on the JC days, the competition for scholarships meant that we were expected to be sure of what we wanted to do with our lives at 19 years of age (or to fool ourselves that we knew what we wanted to do with our lives) – when we really were so fresh and naive and starry-eyed. Few people ever told us that it was okay to be lost at that age so that we may find our true calling.

Perhaps the scholarship system of "inducting talent into the civil service" should be changed to the post-undergraduate examination/interview system that almost every other country besides Singapore adopts, so that those truly motivated to go into public service can do so – after they know better what to do with their lives.

I wish you all the best in the next stage of your career.

#91 Pauline 2009/07/31 at 3:03pm

I agree. The entire talent management system is skewed with the civil service hoarding up talent for itself. PSC should offer post-graduate scholarships instead, to attract people who genuinely wish to serve the government and who are mature enough to understand what they are in for.



#92 Petunia Lee 2009/07/31 at 7:09pm

In life, people make choices. Some choose the wrong husband/wife, and 10 years after the blissful ceremony, they look back and say "I did not know better", and "I was stupid". Others look back and say "I was a great gal/guy but I was seduced by my spouse, who took advantage of me.

I believe this is no different. Most times though, both parties bear equal responsibility. One was too eager and the other was eager enough. And when it comes to bitterness, both parties harbour some. Because, both made sacrifices... and both invested of themselves. Scholars invest of themselves and organizations invest in them too.

When unhappiness blooms in a marriage, two people get hurt. The same happens when a scholarship bond fails to work out because one or the other party is unhappy. These things happen and to blame it all on one party's clever marketing (or clever seduction techniques) is the one-sided plea of the other party.

Whilst there are those who chafe at their bonds, there are equally those who blossom and bear fruit in every aspect of their lives BECAUSE of their bonds and all the opportunities these gave them. These scholarships come with lifelong jobs that buy landed properties and Lexus and holidays to Europe. These scholarships give happiness to entire families from parents to grandparents, and to children yet unborn because all the extended family benefits from the opportunities for growth and career advancement that comes with being a scholar.

Should the scholarship application process be completely destroyed because some scholarship bonds did not work out?

Then what about those people who could be blessed by scholarships? Just because some marriages don't work out does not mean that marriage as an institution should be done away with. 2 parties made a choice to commit to each other. For some it worked out, for others it didn't... and this is despite the best information and intentions.

This article is good because it alerts potential scholars to the possible types of unhappiness that can grow out of a scholarship bond, and thus, people may think carefully before they commit.

But for those who are committed, why chafe? The more you chafe against the bonds that bind you, the more skin abrasion there will be. If you made a choice (even if a bad one on hindsight), it was still your choice, and for the sake of yourself, it helps to make the best of it and turn it into something beautiful. Or unhappiness just leads to more unhappiness.

#93 anonymous 2009/07/31 at 11:38pm

[@Petunia Lee](#)

And in some marriages, one walks away with a better spouse while the other gets some maintenance money.

#94 vitalism 2009/08/01 at 2:02am

Firstly, I really wish to applaud you for this well-written article. As an impressionable 19 year old who was blessed with the option of government scholarships or bond-free university financial aid, I faced what was probably the biggest dilemma of my life thus far: to take the less trodden path, or to follow the crowd?

Eventually, my NS experience (still ongoing) helped me make this decision. I wasn't ready to spend another 6 years as a mere cog in a giant machine, nor did I look forward to the overbearing bureaucracy and redtape that had largely characterized my NS life . Call me idealistic, but I wanted more freedom in exploring my interests and choosing what I want to do.

To those who can somehow afford their overseas education without a government scholarship, I urge you not to sign on the dotted line. Things might look rosy for those scholars now, but surely you wouldn't want to restrict your options 10 years later? Even if you're interested in public service -like myself- you can always join the service after you graduate. It's only fair for scholars and the scholarship boards if both parties fully understand the opportunity cost of this decision.

#95 Petunia Lee 2009/08/01 at 9:16am

[@anonymous](#)

And in other marriages... life is so rich and full one feels like bursting. My husband served out his bond and went beyond. As a family, we never regretted it. I broke my bond. As a family, we never regretted that either.

Take a balanced perspective. It's a cop-out to whine "I was too young to choose" and these scholarship people trapped me. People choose to become doctors at age 19. Some regret it and some don't. After you've enjoyed the scholarship, the last thing you should do is to blame another for your choice.

There are happy stories and there are sad stories. Both. Why blame others for your lot in life? No one pointed a gun at you and made you sign on the dotted line.

#96 desdemona 2009/08/02 at 3:33am

i took the ASEAN scholarship and served the 3 years bond. completed it a few months back and now packing to Europe. Wheee ~

#97 spiegel 2009/08/02 at 4:17am

[@Nick](#)

This is the exact dismissive tone paraded by dear patriarchal figures in the PAP to disparage people who offer alternative perspectives.

A non-argument and a cheap shot.

#98 Fox 2009/08/02 at 7:47am

[@desdemona](#)

~~What an idiot.~~ The ASEAN scholarship comes without a bond. ~~Try harder, troll.~~

#99 libran 2009/08/02 at 4:53pm

Thank you for this very well-written article. I am a foreign student studying at a prestigious JC in Singapore. Recently I have been considering converting to a Singaporean citizenship because it will open up more scholarship opportunities when I go to college. However, after reading your article, I kept asking myself whether the bond is something I can really deal with. And what would happen if after going overseas I realize that Singapore is not the place for me?

In the end I have decided to retain my original citizenship, as I have figured that I'm not ready for a 'bonded' scholarship. The future lies ahead with so much uncertainty, and I still need my freedom.

#100 Zhongye 2009/08/02 at 8:59pm

Really insightful article.

#101 anonymous 2009/08/02 at 11:32pm

[@Petunia Lee](#)

Aye, to each his/her own. Then let us not complain about our own marriages, much less those of other people, broken or not.

#102 Petunia Lee 2009/08/03 at 9:00am

[anonymous](#) :[@Petunia Lee](#)

Aye, to each his/her own. Then let us not complain about our own marriages, much less those of other people, broken or not.

:-) Yah!

#103 Panzer 2009/08/03 at 4:50pm

A piece that resonates strongly.

I was on local merit (open) scholarship and did accountancy in NTU and served in a ministry for 5 years (discounted 1 year off the 6 years then for local scholarships for NS).

I too remember the feeling when my bond ended. I left shortly after and have moved on for stints in the private sector (GLC) as well as public sector (again!) and now am in a stat board.

The point for many of us is that at 19 years old, how many of us truly know what meaning we want to make in this world?

I hope 19 year olds who are bright enough to secure government/stat board scholarships consider that there will be trade-offs and to give themselves more time to find out why really drives them and makes them want to wake up every morning.

#104 Jimmy Mun 2009/08/04 at 3:19pm

I dont know why some people are so determined to knock "physics wizard" because I had the same experience. I was told by the scholarship panel I could study physics ONLY if I take a teaching scholarship, since they have no use for physics grad anywhere else. I suggested I could work in NSTB, and they \*laughed\* and said I am ignorant of what NSTB is, and for running NSTB, they would rather send people to study PPE in Oxford than physics.

Word for word quote. That was in 1995. In fact, I'm curious if the quoted article that mentioned physics and philosophy could be a mistaken interpretation of PPE. PSC never liked physics. That much I can confirm.

I too, lost my love for physics and I can't say I am worse off, considering how many of my friends are bond breakers, and all but one quit, including one president's scholar, as soon as the bond is completed.

#105 M 2009/08/04 at 6:55pm

Well-written.

[@B](#)

As someone on this so-called 'FMS' myself, I can tell you that while those funded by our families are not be bonded to any organisation, we are made to pay for our decisions in guilt. Many assume that we are rich, selfish or both. But just because we have this privilege does not mean that the element of gratefulness is missing. If nothing else, we treasure this opportunity even more because we owe it to the blood and sweat of our parents, and not a faceless organisation.

If you can only afford to study overseas on scholarship, but have to serve a bond, then making that decision is obviously a risk you have to take. If you end up hating the organisation which has paid for your education, don't moan about your self-sacrificing martyrdom and don't fault those who are privately funded. In many cases, the decision to go overseas on one's parents' money is as difficult as that of taking up a scholarship, especially if one has gotten into an Ivy League/Oxbridge university good enough for any scholarship.

Yes, it is a shockingly huge sum of money. And yes, those on FMS have – surprise, surprise – actually "considered" paying their parents back.

#106 Dawn 2009/08/05 at 1:36am

More than 10 years ago, my brother was offered and duly accepted the SAF scholarship, one of the "glittering" scholarships to quote blogger Yumei.

He loved and still loves his job for the most part, knowing no job in the world is perfect, and derived his greatest satisfaction knowing that he's contributing to what he believes is the foundation of the nation.

He trod the path that so many of his peers and predecessors have, seem blessed in many ways, got married young and was given the best opportunities to contribute to the agency that picked him. He has his own share of grouses at work like anyone else who works, but let the manifestations of his contributions and the good he made and saw happen fuel him on.

He's also rewarded well for his intelligence and contributions, and at one time in his career was deputy director of a very large ministry at about 31, 32.. and yes he was well remunerated for his contributions. Before he hit his late 20s he was drawing above \$100k.

The shoes of a scholar aren't meant to be worn by all who were accorded scholarships and even less so, those who weren't. The hat of a scholar is the cup of tea for some people. Don't be sour if it's not yours.

It doesn't take more than one second for the enlightened, unencumbered by delusions and insecurity to see through the farce. This is essentially a meeting of two groups of people – PSC (and other scholarships) rejects and one ex teaching scholar who didn't make it unlike the majority of her peers (in her admission).

The thing is, don't be bitter if the shoes are not meant to fit your feet. Or if you weren't even one to begin with.

#107 Dawn 2009/08/05 at 1:48am

Jimmy Mun, perhaps your testimony is true since you said you were from the 1995 era. The reason it was obvious to lots of people in the know (of the current system) is that PSC sends MANY scholars to do physics.

I don't know what else is there to argue, when plenty of evidence was adduced above with PROOF of numerous scholars from of wide variance (a few OMS, 1 SAFOS and 1 PS) reading physics with PSC's blessings.

Perhaps PSC frowning upon certain subjects was true 15 years ago in your time, but that has changed since the late 90s (in my time). My PSC scholar friends from RJC and HCJC were given free rein to study arts and science subjects (chemistry, physics, economics, mathematics, PPE, law, what have you), as long as they weren't too obscure eg theology. Plenty more of my friends with interest in subjects like genetic biology or biochemistry had the choice of applying to science agencies like Astar.

The reason why so many people knew that self-proclaimed 'physics wizard' is fibbing is that he/she admitted to be a current university student. Which means he or she is DEFINITELY NOT from the era 15 years ago.

Things have changed. Policemen used to wear shorts.

#108 Dawn 2009/08/05 at 2:13am

"They don't have to decide to do pre-med at 19; they can, but they don't have to. Premed is just a set of required courses — if you decide you want try for med school sometime later, you can go back to college / stay longer in college to complete the requirements. Likewise, you can complete premed and not try for medical school, with no real disadvantage. The commitment required here is far less than that required for bonded scholarships. US law schools don't even have such specific requirements; almost any bachelor's would do. In general the US has a far more flexible system than we do."

Note that all medicine aspirant US students WOULD HAVE decided to take up pre-med at 19. They know that in order to qualify for medicine later to become doctors, they'd have to take pre-med at 19. So did they or did they not, at age 18 decide to take pre med with this knowledge of what peg they are? Yes, they did, resoundingly. At 18, did they have 'problems' wrangling with their life choices like whether they REALLY want to be doctors for the rest of their lives? Maybe a weak links of the world would. What this poster meant was MILLIONS of self starting and motivated focused individuals have made the choice without any duress.

Outside of the US, ALL medicine aspirants would have applied to med school at 19, and medicine is possibly the most specialised study of choice, resulting in a most limiting (not in a bad way) career path for medicine graduates.

So what's the big deal?

I think what the poster meant was, millions of people around the world decide what to study at 19.

The hundreds of millions of engineers, accountants, doctors, lawyers, your 40 year old uncle, your 60 year old judge, your 55 year old cardiologist MADE THE DECISION on what they want to do at 19. So what's the big deal?

"Nonetheless, the commitment — or lack thereof — presently required of 19yos here or elsewhere has little bearing on what should be required of them. How 'informed' is their consent — do they know what options they are closing off?"

You are the one missing the point. The observation of youths with poor commitment to a cause and integrity of character is just that, an observation. It may be a result of a degenerating generation in Singapore. It may not be.

The point made here, is that there is no big deal – as opposed to the exaggerated whines and bombastic claims by these degenerates (or sour grapes) – in knowing what shape of a peg you are at

19 and commanding the integrity and principles of character to stand by it for a mere six years of your life. This has been painted above. You can feel free to read through the posts above and also this one again.

Many of the 'local educated' people, non scholars or farmers what have you, make career switch, change fields or try their hand at being their own boss in their late 20s, early 30s to late 30s. Did they stick to death whatever they studied at 19?

So why is the action of people who are certain and principled about their desires and knowledge of what shape of a peg they are at 19 being singled out? \*rolled eyes

#109 anonymous 2009/08/05 at 2:23am

"Fox's contention with amused was that scholarship opportunities for PhD seekers were limited. Whether or not NSTB was 'selective' or 'prestigious', whatever those words mean to you, is beside the point. Try putting some clothes on your straw man next time. It might fool the kids at least." [Editor's Note: See #55 & #75]

The response of amused was correctly meant to address someone saying that few in numbers = selective. This is only true to the poor folks who get offered scholarships given out in small numbers that no one wants. Supply  $\neq$  Selectivity. Supply + Demand = Selectivity. Thats all its meant to correct.

#110 anonymous 2009/08/05 at 2:52am

[Fox](#) : [Editor's Note: Se #71]

@heh

"There is a loophole in your analysis of NSTB for 'physics wizard': 'physics wizard' says he/she is still currently in university, which means at the 'earliest' it was only four years ago when he/she could apply for a 'scholarship' with his 'high achieving friends' who did so."

Where does it say that he/she is currently in university?

"What a fool. Two factors are involved in selectivity, beside supply, the other is DEMAND. You know that bedfellow of supply that J1 kids know about?"

This shows that you know nothing about how the NSTB scholarships are awarded or what the calibre of the people



who were awarded the scholarships was.

Homework 1: Compare the universities which OMS scholars go to and the universities NSTB undergrad scholars went to.

Homework 2: What was the most important criterion for getting the NSTB scholarship? More importantly, who were the kind of people who applied?

I was in the top Sec 4 GEP class in RI (when Wijey was still the headmaster). SAFOS and OMS scholars are dime a dozen to me. I know a couple of NSTB scholars. To the best of my knowledge, the academic A-level result of the average NSTB scholar is significantly better than that of the average OMS or SAFOS scholar. I realize that of course that my sampling of NSTB scholars is poor but that is only because there are so few of them.

I was in the top Sec 4 class in a top school too.

Selectivity still DOES NOT equate to supply. The following quote was the post you made, "The annual number of undergraduate scholarships given out by NSTB, the predecessor of A\*STAR, for studying science is countable with the fingers on one hand. It was considerably more selective than OMS, SAFOS, etc."

that promoted the response of supply and demand, which promoted your response quoted above.

NSTB was given out in smaller numbers than SAFOS and OMS, that is true. But the number of people vying for them, when compared to the number vying for SAFOS and OMS becomes like "can be counted on one hand" in your words. In other words, in simpler language for you, it doesn't matter that NSTB was given out in 5, 7 or 10 times fewer numbers than OMS and SAFOS.

Actually not that many, since only 8 to 10 SAFOS were given out then, and about for 50 OMS. The pool of competing applicants for both sets of scholarships speak for themselves, and cancel out whatever difference in supply figures you're speaking of.

Second, it's no secret that there are some OMS and OMS back then whose A level results were a shade below NSTB applicants. This is not meant to be a surprise, because everyone knows that PSC intentionally eschews the "perfect scorers" and looks for all-rounded applicants.

This is basically the difference between PSC and all the stat boards when fielding scholars, a common knowledge.

The difference we speak of here, is between 4A 3S D and nothing else on CV (who would apply for and get the NSTB), and 4A 2S D or 4A 1 S D+M, president of student council, debate team leader, OCS delta coy, represented RJ/HC in exchange programme to MIT, mathematics or physics Olympiads (who get SAFOS and OMS).

In fact PSC makes this point super clear, and never fails to trumpet to the press when they crown a president's scholar with 3A, 1B and 2 S papers.

The better "average academic results" of NSTB scholars is limited to that – academics and is limited to normally, one less S distinction. Because that IS the way PSC and NSTB (then) were structured to be. PSC IS meant to look for all rounded and well decorated CVs and good, but not necessarily perfect results. This is known to everyone.

It does not extend or say anything at all about selectivity. And I suspect, deep inside, you know it. Cos everyone else does. In my time, none of the 4A 3SD people got PSC scholarships, they applied for the OMS and were rejected.

A running joke among and observation made by PSC scholars is that the people they see in their student history with O level 10 distinctions, or the PSLE overall top scorer and the few nerds with 4A and 3 S distinctions (and nothing else) are the ones who didn't end up getting the best scholarships later on.

Of course another way of looking at it is that the 3S D people who got turned away by PSC and ended up with something else were never who PSC was looking for to begin with. They were of a different peg from the first group of people, so to speak. So they naturally gun for or receive offers of other things.

Once again, this is to remind you as is said before, supply does not equal to selectivity.

And neither do academic results alone.

#111 anonymous 2009/08/05 at 3:03am

Like someone else amusingly painted before, if supply was the only barometer in selectivity as claimed by Fox, then examples like PUB and IRAS scholarships given out in very small numbers would be the most coveted scholarships among scholars. This ludicrous proposition nicely sums up the notion that something given out in "numbers of fingers on one hand" is all it takes to be "hardest to get".

But I must say NSTB was definitely better than IRAS or PUB.

#112 anonymous (Editor : 'anonymous' for #109-#112 has identical email address and similar IP to commentator 'Dawn' #106) 2009/08/05 at 3:08am

"Where does it say that he/she is currently in university?"

You may reread his or her post, its above. "physics wizard" admitted to be a current university student and added that he or she is disappointed by his or her "dismal academic experience"

#113 Dawn 2009/08/05 at 4:19am

[Oikono](#) : [Editor's Note – See #40]

I remember meeting a SPF scholar at university who wanted to go into academia. I told him six years of work after finishing undergraduate might limit his academic options. On my part, I was luck to receive a partial scholarship from my university (in the US) and cut costs by graduating more than a year early. My masters (also in the US) was fully funded by my university and the best part is that I am now free to pursue my interests in academia, something that would not happen had I taken up a scholarship. I never knew this would be the path I would choose post-graduation, but it still happened...and I imagine it could happen to some other student again someday.

Common phenomenon. What you have are some of the most academically bright and academically enthusiastic converging in the best universities of the world reading the subjects they chose out of passion. Is it any wonder they enjoy what they study, or that they do very well at it and receive numerous PhD offers?

My brother received three PhD offers, two from HYPSSM, so did many of my OMS and SAFOS friends a few years after him. What your SPF friend was thinking was that "I kinda enjoy this too, it is something I can put in my list of other things I could do".

Make no mistake, PSC scholars may be committed and enjoy public service, making them commit to a scholarship, but I don't know a single one who ever thinks he could only do one thing forever just because he knew what he wanted to do at 19. Full commitment to something you know you enjoy is not the same as thinking there is nothing else you could ever do for eternity. That's just plain preposterous and almost silly. I hope you understand the difference.

You stumbled on something you realised you could make a living of halfway through your studies and you latch on it. He on the other hand, ambles along and realises how this could be a possible other option 6 years down the road, along with many others I find discover along the way. Then he goes back to service, and plunges himself fully into it. Oh trust me, I've seen the wide eyed enthusiasm of these PSC scholars when they're back. It didn't occur to you that way, because to you, what you found was biggest or all you had. And you were thankful to have found what you liked. So many NUS grads come out of universities not knowing what they can do, applying to jobs as varied as public relations to teaching.

To him, it was an enriching experience, a nice consideration for the future but nevertheless second fiddle to what's ahead of him in the long term.

You may also like to know that the SAFOS and OMS scholars I know who received such PhD offers in university, never returned to pursue that route.

Mostly because they have outgrown it after so many years, or/and discovered they really are made for public service, and in all cases their wives disallowed such a move due to the massive downgrade in lifestyle it entails.

#114 Career switcher 2009/08/05 at 4:46am

Well-written piece. But I think it should be noted that it presents just one person's point of view.

I am a PSC scholar myself, and have served 5 years in the Admin Service. I am now doing my PhD. Sure, a lot of us don't know what we really want out of life at age 19. I am not even sure I know what I want out of life at age 30. But like all things, we make decisions based on the information we have at that point in time.

All decisions have consequences. Some good, some bad. Being bonded is like cohabiting. Some remained committed, some separate within a few years (with some costs), some decide to form a life partnership. At age 19, I was offered the choice between NUS with no bond and a notable UK university with bond (of course there are loans and other options, but let's simplify for now). I decided to go with the latter. I do not regret my decision. My time in UK has been truly transformational. My time in the Admin Svs after that even more so.

I think Singaporeans would do well to see life as a journey, instead of a series of milestones.

Unfortunately, most Singaporeans I talk to seem to think that way. "Oh if I had not wasted the time in the civil service, I would have finished my PhD at age 25 like everyone else", etc. etc. etc. If you keep thinking about "what if I had not taken up the scholarship", it is not only a waste of time, but also very

ungrateful for all the scholarship offered. You might as well ask "what if I had been born into Bill Gates' family with all the resources in the world".

#115 Fox [2009/08/05 at 4:54am](#)

[@Dawn](#)

[Dawn](#) :

My brother received three PhD offers, two from HYPISM, so did many of my OMS and SAFOS friends a few years after him. What your SPF friend was thinking was that "I kinda enjoy this too, it is something I can put in my list of other things I could do".

If your brother was a SAFOS scholar, why did he apply for PhD admissions to HYPISM schools? He would have to go through the trouble and expense of going through the GRE tests, getting recommendation letters from his professors, etc.

#116 Fox [2009/08/05 at 4:59am](#)

[@anonymous](#)

[anonymous](#) :

"Where does it say that he/she is currently in university?"  
You may reread his or her post, its above. "physics wizard" admitted to be a current university student and added that he or she is disappointed by his or her "dismal academic experience"

Where does it say he or she is still a student? Where? Quote me the exact sentence.

Read this again:

"My experience at the much lauded 'world class' local university fell short of my expectation and I began to harbour some regrets of not taking up the overseas studies scholarships."

I could have used the same exact words to describe my own experience in NUS from which I graduated so many years ago.

#117 Fox 2009/08/05 at 5:06am

You don't have to be perfect scorer to be an NSTB undergrad scholar in the 90's. Someone obviously hasn't done his/her homework.

#118 Bondfree 2009/08/05 at 10:13am

I was in the very same shoes just a few years back, just that I did not qualify for a scholarship with no bond. The only scholarship available were, of course, PSC and teaching awards that seems to be so good at that time. Fully paid for education locally (30 grand was a large amount for a 18 year old), 4 years of secured employment (been through a few recessions '97, 01-02', got a feeling that employment was not easy) and the "glamor" of being a scholar (Woohoo?).

Not sure if anyone remembers that there was a time when the papers published a flurry of articles on bond-breakers (propaganda?). I belonged to that time.

Then fortunately, my mum "enlightened" me..

"Do you know what you want in life? Are you sure you want to be bonded?"

The answer was apparent. No.

"Then go explore the world and don't get yourself bonded"

In retrospect, I think I have made a good decision. I did not have the aptitude or interest in teaching and an administrative job at a civil service department, totally do not appeal to me.

My university life was fun-filled and I kept myself occupied every summer with internships of my choice. Even managed to work part-time while doing my internship during one summer.

Applying for grad school, MIT and dreaming of the life I will have in Boston. I would imagine how restricted I would be if I, by any chance, did accept a government scholarship. One of the reasons I did not even try for A\*Star postgrad scholarships.

Been on student exchange to one of the UC campuses in California, and inevitably I felt that the local university that I am in, NUS, has "shortchanged" our education. The bottom line is, if you are financially capable of your education, don't get bonded unless you are absolutely dead sure of your interest. Think it this way, you can still pursue your interest not being a bond-holder, so why block off your options?

#119 Petunia Lee 2009/08/05 at 11:13am

[@Career switcher](#)

QUOTE Career Switcher

I think Singaporeans would do well to see life as a journey, instead of a series of milestones. Unfortunately, most Singaporeans I talk to seem to think that way. "Oh if I had not wasted the time in the civil service, I would have finished my PhD at age 25 like everyone else", etc. etc. etc. If you keep thinking about "what if I had not taken up the scholarship", it is not only a waste of time, but also very ungrateful for all the scholarship offered. You might as well ask "what if I had been born into Bill Gates' family with all the resources in the world".

UNQUOTE Career Switcher

I agree very much with Career Switcher and Anonymous. Whether (1) you're unhappy in your bond... or (2) whether you think that the scholar people around you are unfairly blessed, don't complain about your lot in life. Firstly, the more you complain, the more you launch yourself into excesses of emotional despair, and that'll just demotivate you from giving your best to the job at hand. Secondly, complaining takes up time that could be used to do whatever you are doing well. Thirdly, complaining indiscriminantly does your personal branding at work no good (who's right or wrong doesn't matter – it's still bad press about you and the other).

By losing focus, a scholar destroys all chances he/she has of getting into the pool of "scholars that made it". By losing focus, a farmer destroys all chances he/she has of getting into the pool of "non-scholars that made it". When you've made it, it doesn't matter if you're scholar or not, you'll get all the best opportunities.

At the end of the day, personal performance across interpersonal to technical domains is what organizations look at – a scholarship is an investment in potential. Unless the potential is realized at work, no one will continue to invest in someone because he/she scored some distinctions in the days gone past. And when the organization discerns potential at work from a non-scholar, it is motivated to invest in that person and may even try to make up for lost time.

Poly grads can and have been known to make it into the pool of "non-scholars that made it". And since many, many top scorers increasingly CHOOSE to go to poly, this population is going give grads of any sort (scholars or not) some really stiff competition.

Besides, once you begin to complain, it never ends. Don't I wish I was born into Bill Gates' family too! And gee... why didn't I marry a rich tycoon... why marry only a scholar? See... if I had married a rich

tycoon, I would be jetting off to Milan every fashion season, and I would spend in 3 hours, what a PhD like me earns in one month!

Unless you're living in the slums of somewhere with no education to speak of, there are many opportunities that pop up around. By bemoaning lost opportunities past, one loses many more opportunities present. And things just get worse. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What people don't realise is that the best opportunities are those you never knew you lost. The best jobs are those that are not advertised. People advertise job openings because they can't find someone, or because the person in that job never stays. So, there is something wrong with that job. The nicest jobs see smooth transitions. You get approached you win. You don't get approached, you lose (and you don't even know you lost). The choicest projects are the hush-hush ones. These are offered discreetly to those observed to be the ones who have the highest chances of making it succeed. This happens in every organization in the world.

Why would people give choice opportunities to someone unable to exercise emotional restraint enough to see things in balance... to someone who cannot keep cool under duress and stay alert to see opportunities as and when they appear. If your head is turned back, you do not see the road in front and you'll miss the pile of diamonds in plain sight.

Live forwards, not backwards.

#120 Jimmy Mun 2009/08/05 at 11:19am

I agree with Fox that Physics Wizard did not suggest that he is a current undergrad. He also did not say it was impossible to get a scholarship, just "lack of support". If I said everything the scholarship panel wanted to hear, maybe I would have gotten an Open scholarship to study physics, despite getting earmarked to teach. (I did not apply for a Teaching scholarship).

People read what they want to see, even top scholars. It's just an awful shame that the self selection process of the scholarship system leaves the reins of the country to such bigoted people.

#121 Petunia Lee 2009/08/05 at 1:25pm

TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth; 5



Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same, 10  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back. 15  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

By Robert Frost

#122 Tan Pin Pin 2009/08/05 at 10:04pm

I asked Yu-Mei if she could write Once Bonded because I felt that there was an unconscionably huge lacuna in the provision of impartial advice to young Singaporeans during Singapore's annual scholarship application exercise. All the literature I have seen (eg ST's Scholars' Choice Supplements) waxes lyrical about the wonderful working experience during the bond period. It is for some and it isn't for others as you can see in some of these comments. This essay reminds young applicants who may be pressured by their parents, schools or friends to sign on for scholarships that their experience could go either way. They owe it to themselves to think through the opportunity cost to themselves if their work experience, through no fault of anyone, turns out to be a raw fit.

On the notion of cost, I have reservations about whether the bulk buying of the brains and tying them into Government, GLC, Statutory Board jobs (Singapore Inc) benefits Singapore in the long run. I don't feel uncomfortable with us putting all our eggs in one basket and I mean this not just in terms of industries, but also mindsets, skill sets, ways of thinking and engaging with others.

One reason for the bond is to tie the brightest literally to Singapore. The idea is that without the bond, these people will leave for the private sector or Singapore entirely. Moving forward, I hope the-

powers-that-be will restrain themselves from using such a short term and blunt solution to a difficult issue. This Band-aid does not solve the underlying issues why people leave in the first place. They need to be addressed and there are no easy solutions.

Tan Pin Pin, Guest Editor, s/pores issue #4

#123 glynsen 2009/08/06 at 12:03am

i disagreed with yu-mei and i guess i have to disagree (slightly) with pin pin as well.

relative to one's lifespan, a bond may be a short term and blunt solution, but it's arguably the best and easiest solution. a new generation dictates that it is no longer cool to be outwardly pro-government, inasmuch as these youngsters are still going to vote for the ruling party (closet supporters, perhaps, or just not much of a choice). the good thing is it spurs academic discussion, the bad thing is that it defers people from outwardly saying that they love the country enough to want to make positive change, or at least contribute in the best possible way they can, especially when their peers would probably be jeering around them.

the issue is that people lack the initiative – or are afraid of – to come forward and say they want to serve, or do the whole government job thing. a scholarship from the public sector puts this into perspective and transfers the input (monetary sponsorship) into a desired output (somebody who works for the country and its subsidiary ministries) – and that's what makes the world go round, an endless input-output stream of costs and benefits.

from what i see, the next best solution is unfortunately the instilling of a sense of nationalism and love for home – that is ironically something personal and self-directed, unless when the time around national day comes and everybody just starts singing the majulah singapura due to the drumming atmosphere from the exploding fireworks. so yup, oh well.

#124 Observer 2009/08/06 at 12:37am

[Jimmy Mun](#) : [Editor' Note: See #120]

I agree with Fox that Physics Wizard did not suggest that he is a current undergrad. He also did not say it was impossible to get a scholarship, just "lack of support". If I said everything the scholarship panel wanted to hear, maybe I would have gotten an Open scholarship to study physics, despite getting earmarked to teach. (I did not apply for a Teaching

scholarship).

People read what they want to see, even top scholars. It's just an awful shame that the self selection process of the scholarship system leaves the reins of the country to such bigoted people.

How's this then? Go read the post again. He or she said the expectation he or she nursed of NUS's claims of being "world-class" fell miserably. I trust you can figure out when did our local universities start to do their 'marketing campaigns' and making claims of being \*cringe\* "world class". Was it during Yu Mei's era? \*laughs

Anymore arguments?

#125 Observer [2009/08/06 at 12:44am](#)

[Fox](#) :

[@Dawn](#)

[Dawn](#) :

My brother received three PhD offers, two from HYPISM, so did many of my OMS and SAFOS friends a few years after him. What your SPF friend was thinking was that "I kinda enjoy this too, it is something I can put in my list of other things I could do".

If your brother was a SAFOS scholar, why did he apply for PhD admissions to HYPISM schools? He would have to go through the trouble and expense of going through the GRE tests, getting recommendation letters from his professors, etc.

Its very common.

These PSC scholars, OMS, SAFOS, many of them get offered to do PhD without applying. We're talking about people who graduated top of their department in top universities. My brother graduated top of his whole department. He was invited by his professors in his undergrad university, the university in the US in which he did his master's, and another professor in an HYPISM to do PhD.

We're talking about different leagues here, way different, and perhaps you are not exposed to such people or places, despite coming from the top GEP class in RI :). Ending up in .....

I knew it from the getgo of this conversation even before you asked Dawn. I know a couple of graduates from one of NUS's most selective course chem engineering who wanted to do PhD.. they applied everywhere in the US and ended up in ...Penn State and University of Houston the sort.. third rate schools..can't even make it to UT Austin which is at least a decent public university. LOL

#126 Observer 2009/08/06 at 12:50am

[Fox](#) :

You don't have to be perfect scorer to be an NSTB undergrad scholar in the 90's. Someone obviously hasn't done his/her homework.

I noticed that you are finally shut up with your supply alone = selectivity BS. that is good..good.. People don't generally care about unpopular, low-in-demand stuff. You mean it takes less than 4A3SD to receive NSTB when they have nothing else to offer? looks like it was worse than I thought.

#127 Observer 2009/08/06 at 1:11am

[anonymous](#) :

[Fox](#) :

@heh

In my time, none of the 4A 3SD people got PSC scholarships, they applied for the OMS and were rejected.

A running joke among and observation made by PSC scholars is that the people they see in their student history with O level 10 distinctions, or the PSLE overall top scorer and the few nerds with 4A and 3 S distinctions (and nothing else) are the ones who didn't end up getting the best scholarships later on.

Your experience and testimony are exactly what I witnessed. Amazing.

Back in sec school, the teachers earmarked students they believed were the 'stars' and would groom them painstakingly in the hope that these would be the students that become THE top scholars.

So the story unfolded: after the A levels, NONE of them got the scholarships they wanted (PSC), i'm not even sure they managed to get stat board ones, because they were never honest about who rejected them. But to safe to say we all know they all applied. It was what everyone wanted. It was a sad sight. The only one out of the 'stars' got a measly SMS, some 2nd rung award from SAF, he couldn't even get OMS!!!

On the other hand, the class produced two PSC scholars, one OMS and the other a OS cum PS. Both were not the so-called star students. Many years down the road, I met up with them. They remained firm friends all through these years, and were in the same AO course. Reminiscing on the past and looking at the other PSC scholar-AOs (of the cohort) around them in the course, they said "Dude it's just us..just the two of us from back then"

I mean who doesn't know that the so called nerds and stars invariably fall short and flat on their faces year after year. Guess what happened to the rest of the stars? One ended up with SMS, can't even get OMS, the rest could not take up stat board scholarships, which are a clear admission of defeat. Let's face it. If you ended up with one, everyone knows 100% chance you're a OMS reject.

The no disruption to NS makes it stick out further like a sore thumb, so the fallen stars went to NUS medicine with a tail between their tails (at least can disrupt and hope to blend in with the PSC disrruptees and no need to bear the shame of defeat of stat board, can say that you take up medicine out of 'interest'), who's kidding who, we ALL know they ALL applied to scholarships. In any case, they all didn't do that well for their A levels also, and did not have any S Merit or Distinctions.

It was a sight for sore eyes.

#128 Observer 2009/08/06 at 1:31am

[Tan Pin Pin](#) :

I asked Yu-Mei if she could write Once Bonded because I felt that there was an unconscionably huge lacuna in the provision of impartial advice to young Singaporeans during Singapore's annual scholarship application exercise. All the literature I

have seen (eg ST's Scholars' Choice Supplements) waxed lyrical about the wonderful working experience during the bond period. It is for some and it isn't for others as you can see in some of these comments.

Your idea to counterbalance the reporting in Scholars' Choice featuring happy scholars is to profile one who fell through the cracks and didn't make it. It does make tactical and logical sense. Bravo.

Another observation. Besides that, a thorough eyeball through the comments, you will all notice something – contented, happy or/and successful scholars and farmers who thought they are scholars, actually on some indiscriminately given local study (teaching or LSA or what the heck) award griping and whining in chorus when the topic is not even about them.

Really. Said before. Will say again.

If you only have some dubious, unheard-of "2 year bond", you're not a scholar in the scholar sense.

If you graduated from a local university, you're not a scholar in the scholar sense.

If you have some half bit teaching or healthcare job, you're not a scholar in the scholar sense.

#129 Observer 2009/08/06 at 1:40am

[Jimmy Mun](#) :

If I said everything the scholarship panel wanted to hear, maybe I would have gotten an Open scholarship to study physics, despite getting earmarked to teach. (I did not apply for a Teaching scholarship).

OMS (teaching) is NOT OMS (open). It's more tied than anything else. Either they offer someone OMS (Open) or they earmark them to teach and give them OMS (teaching). Both propositions do not co-exist.

Second, a lot of people, even farmers like me, know that saying what you think PSC wants to hear never works. It's how the 300 people who get called up for interview out of the >2000 who applied, get shown the door and rejected. If all it takes to get something is to THINK you know what to do to get it, there won't be any failures. Don't be silly.

#130 Observer 2009/08/06 at 2:08am

[Bondfree](#) : [Editor's Note: See #118]

I was in the very same shoes just a few years back, just that I did not qualify for a scholarship with no bond. The only scholarship available were, of course, PSC and teaching awards that seems to be so good at that time. Fully paid for education locally (30 grand was a large amount for a 18 year old), 4 years of secured employment (been through a few recessions '97, 01-02', got a feeling that employment was not easy) and the "glamor" of being a scholar (Woohoo?). Not sure if anyone remembers that there was a time when the papers published a flurry of articles on bond-breakers (propaganda?). I belonged to that time.

Then fortunately, my mum "enlightened" me..

"Do you know what you want in life? Are you sure you want to be bonded?"

The answer was apparent. No.

"Then go explore the world and don't get yourself bonded"

In retrospect, I think I have made a good decision. I did not have the aptitude or interest in teaching and an administrative job at a civil service department, totally do not appeal to me.

My university life was fun-filled and I kept myself occupied every summer with internships of my choice. Even managed to work part-time while doing my internship during one summer.

Applying for grad school, MIT and dreaming of the life I will have in Boston. I would imagine how restricted I would be if I, by any chance, did accept a government scholarship. One of the reasons I did not even try for A\*Star postgrad scholarships. Been on student exchange to one of the UC campuses in California, and inevitably I felt that the local university that I am in, NUS, has "shortchanged" our education. The bottom line is, if you are financially capable of your education, don't

get bonded unless you are absolutely dead sure of your interest. Think it this way, you can still pursue your interest not being a bond-holder, so why block off your options?

I'm a unbonded professional in the private sector, went to a top 2 JC and attended a top university funded by parents.

First off, clown there WERE MANY scholarships then. Just that they were out of your league, since you say "The only scholarship available were, of course, PSC and teaching awards that seems to be so good at that time.". This is of course, a joke. The PSC-local teaching awards were just ALL that was AVAILABLE to you.

Till today, I remain amazed that there are deluded local teaching awardees who think that they are scholars. Help. Help.

Next, what is "civil service department" and they do not do "admin jobs". Good grief.

You can go on dreaming about MIT post grad. Although post grad is infinitely easier to get in than undergrad anywhere, it's still a tall order for people from NUS. Refer to my post on NUS chem engineering second upper farmers ending up in Houston and Penn State.

#131 Fox 2009/08/06 at 2:10am

[Anon](#) : [Editor's Note: See #125]

[Fox](#) :

[@Dawn](#)

[Dawn](#) :

My brother received three PhD offers, two from HYPISM, so did many of my OMS and SAFOS friends a few years after him. What your SPF friend was thinking was that "I kinda enjoy this too, it is something I can put in my list of other things I could do".

If your brother was a SAFOS scholar, why did he apply for PhD admissions to HYPISM schools? He would have to go through the trouble and expense of going through the



GRE tests, getting recommendation letters from his professors, etc.

Its very common.

These PSC scholars, OMS, SAFOS, many of them get offered to do PhD without applying. We're talking about people who graduated top of their department in top universities. My brother graduated top of his whole department. He was invited by his professors in his undergrad university, the university in the US in which he did his master's, and another professor in an HYPISM to do PhD.

We're talking about different leagues here, way different, and perhaps you are not exposed to such people or places, despite coming from the top GEP class in RI :). Ending up in .....

I knew it from the getgo of this conversation even before you asked Dawn. I know a couple of graduates from one of NUS's most selective course chem engineering who wanted to do PhD.. they applied everywhere in the US and ended up in ...Penn State and University of Houston the sort.. third rate schools..can't even make it to UT Austin which is at least a decent public university. LOL

Muahahaha.

No one invites so and so to the PhD program solely on the basis of him or her topping his department. I've never heard of such a thing in science and engineering. I have more experienced colleagues who did their PhDs in MIT and Stanford and I just asked them that. They've told me it is utter BS.

In fact, beyond a certain GPA cutoff, no one cares. The important criteria are undergraduate research and motivation. This is why recommendation letters are extremely important.

The only person whom I think might have been asked to stay on was Choy Dawen when he was at MIT but that was because he did involve himself actively in undergraduate physics research from the start. He had to go back to the navy in the end which was an utter waste of his talent.

#132 Jimmy Mun 2009/08/06 at 2:26am

[@Observer](#)

There was talk of "Boston of the East" since the early 90s and by the time Shih Choon Fong arrived in 1999, NUS, like our public transport system, was assumed to be world class, not that I believe it. (Where does the Yu Mei part even come in?)

If Physics Wizard was like me, did not want to teach, did not want to serve the army, and was honest about it, I suspect he would have been discouraged from doing Physics right up till the late 90s, at the very least, since the govt attitude then was to channel every available science student into engineering, before the "life science" craze hit anyway.

Why dont you guys just admit that you made a mistake due to your prejudices and jumped to a wrong conclusion? Is this what our "top JCs" are churning out these days?

#133 Observer 2009/08/06 at 2:27am

The main source (99%) of the disconnect in understanding in such discussions is the input and existence of people who think that they fit the bill or are the topic of discussion when they can't be further from that.

#134 Jimmy Mun 2009/08/06 at 2:40am

[@Observer](#)

Reminder: the article is entitled "Once Bonded", not "Once Scholar". Dont understand why you want to go on and on about who is really a scholar and who is not. You should visit a psychiatrist to discuss your issues.

#135 Observer 2009/08/06 at 2:42am

[Fox](#) : [Editor : See #131]

[Anon](#) :

[Fox](#) :

[@Dawn](#)

[Dawn](#) :

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from HYPISM, so did many of my OMS and SAFOS friends a few years after him. What your SPF friend was thinking was that "I kinda enjoy this too, it is something I can put in my list of other things I could do".

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Its very common.

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of such a thing in science and engineering. I have more experienced colleagues who did their PhDs in MIT and Stanford and I just asked them that. They've told me it is utter BS.

In fact, beyond a certain GPA cutoff, no one cares. The important criteria are undergraduate research and motivation. This is why recommendation letters are extremely important. The only person whom I think might have been asked to stay on was Choy Dawen when he was at MIT but that was because he did involve himself actively in undergraduate physics research from the start. He had to go back to the navy in the end which was an utter waste of his talent.

~~My dear farmer, look what your NUS education has blighted you with. Intellectual darkness, inability to think and tunnel vision, and most of all, elite envy!! hahahaha!~~

You asked Dawn why did her brother apply for PhD. The thing among us is, we know PLENTY of people who are offered PhD places by top schools after their master's. They are dime a dozen you know? They DID NOT apply. That's the thing. Such people top their departments. That was a description of the set, not the prerequisite. Gettit?

~~I knew you did not get it and never knew (as I stated above about knowing hahaha), because I knew where you come from, that little cubby hole you crawled out from, where people from chem engin 2nd upper frantically do their little applications after their 4 yr hon course, taking GRE tests just to end up in U of HOuston and Penn State hahahahaha!!!~~

~~I pointed out to you to wake up. The league of people we're talking about are way out of your league, that you had to go ASK someone else. Why of cos. It's out of your league :)~~

Topping the department is NOT the only thing that gets such people PhD offers. People who top the department is the demographic that receive PhD offers without THEIR APPLYING. ~~They are way out of your league. That was what I tried to tell you. But I can see the intellectual darkness you suffered has taken its toll.~~

~~These people who top the departments do not get PhD offers for topping the department. The "topping the department" was my DESCRIPTION to paint to you a world you never know about. It's who they are and what they have achieved in their undergraduate and post graduate years. We're not even talking about "UNDERgraduate research" anymore, you also forgot that they finish their master's in four years ah?~~

~~What a sore loser farmer. Ended up in farmer university like the majority of the proverbial FALLEN from the top class in sec sch/JC (how familiar to so many of us!), tooting the horn online of non-existent selectivity to canvas for justification of not making it, unbelievably funny crap about selectivity dominated by poor supply..wahahahahaha~~

~~Do you even know there are Singaporeans who are offered elite university places even though they did not apply?? Ignorant frog in the well punching above your weight.~~

#136 Observer 2009/08/06 at 2:46am

[Jimmy Mun](#) :

[@Observer](#)

Reminder: the article is entitled "Once Bonded", not "Once Scholar". Dont understand why you want to go on and on about who is really a scholar and who is not. You should visit a psychiatrist to discuss your issues.

Poor jimmy mun. Your inferior education is showing also.

Once bonded... not a scholar or a scholar, the latter proposition in the equation, dictates HOW YOU TAKE TO THE BOND – which is the bedrock of the debate. It is that key difference that is the ONLY thing that matters. That is why it matters to the discussion.

And you're kidding no one. Read through the posts and dare you come back to say the deluded local awardees do not think they're scholars? Do see a psychiatrist, heed your own advice. You need the therapy for what you went through.

#137 Observer 2009/08/06 at 2:55am

[Jimmy Mun](#) :

[@Observer](#)

There was talk of "Boston of the East" since the early 90s and by the time Shih Choon Fong arrived in 1999, NUS, like our public transport system, was assumed to be world class, not that I believe it. (Where does the Yu Mei part even come in?) If Physics Wizard was like me, did not want to teach, did not want to serve the army, and was honest about it, I suspect he would have been discouraged from doing Physics right up till

the late 90s, at the very least, since the govt attitude then was to channel every available science student into engineering, before the "life science" craze hit anyway.

Why dont you guys just admit that you made a mistake due to your prejudices and jumped to a wrong conclusion? Is this what our "top JCs" are churning out these days?

I am happy you do not believe it. You have hope.

By the way, why is Shih Choon Fong, the one time head of your school a Harvard graduate?

It was NUS who called itself "world class" to the media. No one else in the universe did.

I personally didn't apply to any scholarship as I knew I have a family to work for, who have more than enough to pay for my studies, that was a non-issue. What I can't stand from then until now is the thick-skinned frog in the well syndrome exhibited by the people in JC who stayed behind. They all...speak, think and behave like ...you. Refer to your public transport system and "assumed to be" statement.

Very very typical of frogs in the well that abound in our society these days due to the poor standards and pedagogy of our local universities. The common tendency for bombastic claims or allegations without the need for substantiation, nicely fitting in with the 'world class' claims of your alma mater also. The anti-thesis of intellectual quest and thoery defence.

#138 Observer 2009/08/06 at 3:09am

Navy isn't "an utter waste of talent". Ending up in NUS may be. But since the people who go truly deserve it, there is no talent to be wasted. Hence, nah..

#139 Observer2009/08/06 at 3:28am

They are just behaving according to what happened to them. OAfflicted by the top in sec sch but nothing after A level syndrome.

#140 Eugene 2009/08/06 at 5:32am

[Tan Pin Pin](#) :

I asked Yu-Mei if she could write *Once Bonded* because I felt that there was an unconscionably huge lacuna in the provision of impartial advice to young Singaporeans during Singapore's annual scholarship application exercise. All the literature I have seen (eg ST's Scholars' Choice Supplements) waxes lyrical about the wonderful working experience during the bond period. It is for some and it isn't for others as you can see in some of these comments. This essay reminds young applicants who may be pressured by their parents, schools or friends to sign on for scholarships that their experience could go either way. They owe it to themselves to think through the opportunity cost to themselves if their work experience, through no fault of anyone, turns out to be a raw fit.

On the notion of cost, I have reservations about whether the bulk buying of the brains and tying them into Government, GLC, Statutory Board jobs (Singapore Inc) benefits Singapore in the long run. I don't feel uncomfortable with us putting all our eggs in one basket and I mean this not just in terms of industries, but also mindsets, skill sets, ways of thinking and engaging with others.

One reason for the bond is to tie the brightest literally to Singapore. The idea is that without the bond, these people will leave for the private sector or Singapore entirely. Moving forward, I hope the-powers-that-be will restrain themselves from using such a short term and blunt solution to a difficult issue. This Band-aid does not solve the underlying issues why people leave in the first place. They need to be addressed and there are no easy solutions.

Tan Pin Pin, Guest Editor, s/pores issue #4

Agree that more information is a good thing.

In my time (more than 10 years ago), PSC used to give out leaflets with accounts of scholars describing the positive aspects of their work. The official media publicity was in the same vein. But it was difficult to find out about the other side of the story — what the actual day-to-day work was like (beyond making policy e.g. taking minutes, drafting emails, collating inputs, etc?), what choices are available if you decide that Public Service life is not for you, or if you fall short of standards.

In the end, the government wants its scholars to be happy and adequately challenged. Every year, PSC gives out 50-100 scholarships, determining the fate of scholars for the next 8-12 years of their lives. It would do both sides much good if all relevant information was easily available to the would-be scholar, who would then make a more informed decision on this momentous undertaking.

#141 Petunia Lee 2009/08/06 at 9:29am

[Tan Pin Pin](#): I asked Yu-Mei if she could write Once Bonded because I felt that there was an unconscionably huge lacuna in the provision of impartial advice to young Singaporeans during Singapore's annual scholarship application exercise. All the literature I have seen (eg ST's Scholars' Choice Supplements) waxes lyrical about the wonderful working experience during the bond period. It is for some and it isn't for others as you can see in some of these comments. This essay reminds young applicants who may be pressured by their parents, schools or friends to sign on for scholarships that their experience could go either way. They owe it to themselves to think through the opportunity cost to themselves if their work experience, through no fault of anyone, turns out to be a raw fit.

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Singapore. The idea is that without the bond, these people will leave for the private sector or Singapore entirely. Moving forward, I hope the-powers-that-be will restrain themselves from using such a short term and blunt solution to a difficult issue. This Band-aid does not solve the underlying issues why people leave in the first place. They need to be addressed and there are no easy solutions.

Tan Pin Pin, Guest Editor, s/pores issue #4

Bravo then... the article does go some way in filling an unconscionably huge lacuna. Recruiting for person-organization or person-job fit is important no matter the organization. It is important to give people a realistic job preview. I think the piece is wonderful for students still exploring scholarship options. It helps a person make up his/her mind knowing that "happily ever after" may not happen. So, in that sense, this piece is absolutely important to publish and publish widely too.

However, there are other audiences reading the article besides potential scholars. Notably, there is a population who signed without knowing all the above, and are currently studying. After reading, they may begin feel trapped (when they otherwise would not) and begin to focus on the glass half empty, rather than the glass half full. In an interesting psychology experiment, researchers primed (1) subjects (Group A) to expect that they would be interacting with a very nasty and unfriendly person, thus creating an a priori negative bias; and (2) subjects (Group B) to expect that they would be a very nice and friendly person, thus creating an a priori a positive bias.

Actually, the subjects' interaction partners were neither extremely friendly nor extremely nasty. Just a normal person and a clueless random pick.

Negatively biased subjects were extra friendly to their interaction partners who (being normal people) were extra friendly back. However, negatively biased subjects persisted in seeing hostilities underneath their interaction partner's forced smiles.

Potentially, what could happen is that these few hundred scholars spread evenly across 4 years of university and representing millions of dollars of taxpayer funds can have seeds of bias already planted. In a sense, these MAY turn into people who won't give their organizations a chance no matter what their organizations do for them.

The older folks used to say to me "Before you marry, open both eyes. After you're married, close one eye and see the best in your partner so that your partner will fulfill your expectations of him".

So, for those who have not signed on the dotted line, know that there may (or may not) be hefty opportunity costs to locking yourself in early... Getting to know the potential spouse better is a good idea before you register a legally binding marriage.

Those who have already signed may want to give themselves the best chances of success and of making it into the pool of "scholars who made it", by mentally disciplining themselves to be neutral and open... and not let a priori biases determine future reality. Reality is always birthed twice. Its first existence is as a dream, a vision, a hope, a positive bias, a negative bias, a fear, a nightmare... The human psychology is far stronger than most people realize. Think of a nightmare often enough and it becomes TRUE.

There is no way to illustrate this better than another classic experiment where randomly picked students were listed in a "high performer list" given to the class teacher. At the end of the year, these randomly picked students consistently did better than others because the teacher's bias had been operating the whole year long... and this bias had come TRUE.

So, in all sincerity, I believe that Yu-Mei's piece is not just important, it is extremely important... but one worries nonetheless, for those young ones who may not give their organizations a chance to show that they care after reading her. The perspective needs some balance. Everyone (scholar or not) and every organization (government or not) deserves a fair chance.

If you're already in it, you make the best of it. Stay alert to opportunities to perform. Be on the look out for interesting learning and exciting projects. Make friends where you work. Reach out and care. Walk on boldly the path that you have chosen and appreciate the light even if there are shadows... for shadows there always will be wherever you go.

#142 s/pores 2009/08/06 at 9:33am

[@Observer](#)

Editors' note 2.

Yet another reminder as the debate heats up: please be civil and mature in your comments and response. Argue, and with all the flourishes of rhetoric you want, but there is absolutely no need to muddy the tone of a serious journal here with condescending and demeaning invectives. If a person does not get your argument, restate it if you think it is a question of misinterpretation, or just let it go if you think the other person is simply not getting it; live and let die. While condescension and personal attacks reflect badly on you, it also disrupts the space that our journal is aiming to provide

for reasonable people to discuss serious issues. We have thus decided to show the door to anyone who does not seem to appreciate this basic decency.

Another point of reminder. Please stick to ONE name for easy reference and for the sake of a proper debate. We will assume that you are showing disrespect for those who want a good discussion here and for the journal if you spam the comments with shifting, multiple names that are sometimes childish jabs at those you are responding to.

Otherwise, thank you all for the very enlightening discussions.

#143 Don 2009/08/08 at 8:06pm

I think all of those arguing are damn childish.

This is a place for amiable discussion, not immature bickerings. We may not agree with each other, but let us exercise understanding and tolerance.

Also, remember, this is a public forum. Take everything that is said here with a HUGGGE pinch of salt. For obvious reasons whenever I see posters shuffling between different nicks [but obviously the same person] rattling on and on about graduating from so and so elite schs or his/her "sibling" graduating from elite school I feel like laughing. Just rmb, this is a public forum, anyone can say anything.

I think this piece of article is beautiful. Some of you might disagree with her slightly disapproving view of the civil service in general, but we must admit that she has articulated some very noteworthy issues. Also, she has detailed her decision making process and her thought process quite meticulously, and this in itself will serve as a useful guide to people contemplating on taking the same route.

#144 Student 2009/08/09 at 8:17pm

That said, it'll still take anyone to go through the exact same things to learn. I wouldn't be surprised that 10 years later, that former student of yours goes some where and publish an article telling the world about the same damned thing.

#145 Qian 2009/08/10 at 3:00am

Interesting essay I was alerted to by insiders.

I think the poster's nick was meant to mock the sour grapes, and not to indicate (different) identity. I also don't believe that Dawn is the as good grief. The owner of the blog seems quite active in checking, perhaps they can comment.

Maybe the world is very far-removed from you, so to actually interact with a scholar or his family member is an unreachable and unmanageable concept to you, no offence. There are many of them around, so naturally even more of their loved ones. There are way too many who know and are related to the success stories, that I cannot believe so few have stood up and watched this agenda-laden charade play out.

On my part, I thank God every day that my parent sent us to the states for my undergrad some years ago. Because of that, I've since been happily married to a scholar who's still happily serving. His career has got us comfortable private homes and cars, bright futures for our children. It meant that I could stop work at 30 and do what I really enjoy, which is being with my children full time. Nowadays I spend my time with my kids, I take short trips to Phuket and Bali with other wives, and volunteer my time with the association of wives to help the needy.

My husband's interest in his job still burns strong, and he loves his work and country with a passion. He has a myriad of choices laid out for him after he graduated, including the option of doing a PhD in top schools when he finishes his bond.

Before he was half way through his bond, he told me that option was "unthinkable" when his elder sister who just finished hers in an ordinary (farmer) university came back drawing a mere \$4500 as a post doc, not even half of what he was drawing at 26! It was immediately thrown out of the window and never seemed more unpalatable to the senses. And I'd never allow him to do that.

I can't think of any downside to my experience as the wife other than that he has little time for me, and it can get quite lonely, so I quickly had children to keep myself busy and alleviated the loneliness. My husband travels frequently throughout his career, some appointments more so than others. Minimum once a month.

Naysayers and have-nots can say what they want, write all the long rambling posts and essays they wish, the exceptional few who fell through the cracks can console themselves however they wish. Even those who think they're scholars but are not can delude their heart out! It all matters not.

First, they're not in the system. They didn't get anything to be a part of it. This is an important point because there's little credibility and logic in your words about a kingdom you were not a member of and could not see. This set of people don't even qualify to speak, unlike the blogger because they are nothing but outsiders with many of them admittedly rejects!! Those who think they're scholars but they're not, your critique is worthless because authority you summon (self belief that you're a scholar) is fallacious. Everyone, except actual scholars and their loved ones in the system like Ms Bala, Regina, Petunia Lee, Dawn, all have been speaking out of your arse. That's the terminology for talking a whole lot when you've not earned the stripes right? Oh, how humans like to give their 'two cents' without

having one to their names, or sink their teeth into the cause that soothes their insecurities or broken dreams..

Logically, the people whose words of any salt to speak about scholarships ARE scholars. I don't know a single scholar who has a black and white viewpoint of his career, experience and time. Experience is varied, and rich and colourful in texture.

Its a mix of the good and the bad like all things, but for the success stories, they are trailblazing today because some time down the road before, they decided the bad can't compare to the good in the bag, and it's all worth it at the end of the day.

Have nots, you can knock yourself out talking. I'm forever grateful that the scholarship system came with a job that changed our lives, secured our futures and most of all, it's testament that Singapore is a truly meritocratic society.

Anyone, only limited by his diligence, intellect and personality, and not by his colour or religion or status of his father, even a farmer's son, can scale the heights of meritocracy and become a general and minister.

I am well and truly blessed, and we never forget what we have to thank. The opportunities of meritocracy and his scholarship.

#146 Qian 2009/08/10 at 3:28am

To the non scholars, if you actually still dream you've a case against what I said about credibility, just answer a simple question in front of everyone now. Do you know a scholar knows better about scholarships and a scholar's life, or YOU?

You know the answer yourself. This answer also directly applies to the issue of non scholars who think they're scholars, thinking they have a piece of a pie (of resonance or can 'relate') of the topic. But you see, they don't. Because one's respective identity directly affects the credibility and authority of speech.

Ms Bala feeling like a cog in a wheel of enormity? I say select your scholarship wisely. That will make or break your experience. Teaching scholarships are generally shunned, till today. So no surprises there. I am not surprised about some awardee who thought he's a scholar feels like a cog. It's a case of a non-scholar, who thinks he is a scholar, and when treated like a non-scholar as he rightfully is, wonders whether all scholars are treated this way.

In my time, there was a widespread saying in RJC and HwaChong, the only scholarships worth taking are PSC ones..from PS down the line to OMS (Tied) but please gun for OMS (Open)..anything else is

not worth your time. As years passed, the list included GIC also. That said there are many OMS (teaching) scholars who did well, made good, made principal at supersonic speed, or move on to Administrative Service, so no idea why OMS (teaching) was still shunned. I think most people are put off by the teaching bit unless they have genuine passion for it. I even know someone who was offered an OMS (teaching) turning it down for a stat board one.

Cog in the wheel is a far cry from the experience of my husband and his peers. And its obvious who the people who feel this way are and whether they're even real scholars. My husband (and his fellow top scholars, I won't divulge which agency) have never felt blended in, and in fact always felt special and set apart from day one of becoming scholars, even when they came back for holiday attachments LOL and there on.

If you're good enough to be offered these scholarships (Top PSC ones, GIC) cherish the opportunity. If you've been offered a wide range, CHOOSE WIDELY and gun for only the best of the best! God bless, all the best! Enjoy the ride..!

#147 Jurong NUS English Graduate 2009/08/10 at 7:54am

It is patently clear that one of the posters here is using the different nicks to spawn multiple postings. Fortunately, it is not difficult to detect such chicanery. Let us use 'Qian' as the example.

1. The sentences are often topic prominent. ('Cog in the wheel is a far cry from the experience of my husband and his peers', 'Interesting essay I was alerted to by insiders') This is often a sign that the poster is a native Singlish speaker or does not speak English natively.
2. The poster uses incomplete sentences. ('Minimum once a month.')
3. The tenses in the sentences do not necessarily agree. ('Before he was half way through his bond, he told me that option was "unthinkable" when his elder sister who just finished hers in an ordinary...').
4. The tenses in the sentence do not always agree with the grammatical number. ('Everyone, except actual scholars and their loved ones in the system like Ms Bala, Regina, Petunia Lee, Dawn, all have been speaking out of your arse.')

They strongly suggest that the poster is not a native English speaker or has not had prolonged exposure to the standard register of the language, and give lie to the claim that he/she was educated in the States. Interested readers may wish to pick out other postings which have been written under different nicks but still exhibit the same grammatical features.

#148 Petunia Lee 2009/08/10 at 12:04pm

[Qian](#) :</strongNaysayers and have-nots can say what they want, write all the long rambling posts and essays they wish, the exceptional few who fell through the cracks can console themselves however they wish. Even those who think they're scholars but are not can delude their heart out! It all matters not.

I think it is dangerous and socially divisive to draw the line between the haves and have nots. Riots break out and people die when battle lines are thus drawn. To scream out that you have in another country where there are many many have-nots and little law and order, is an invitation to daylight robbery, kidnapping and rape. Let us not go in that direction. It is unbecoming of a scholar and of the members of a scholar's family to draw these lines. These lines go against every principle upon which the scholarship system is based.

A scholarship is nothing more than a more evolved format of something that has existed in rural areas for a long time. The entire village pools funds together so that the brightest child in the village can go out into the larger world, obtain an education, grow in wisdom and strength... and come back to help/lead his fellow villagers towards a better life. That is why scholars are picked.

Naturally, when this child returns to the village, he/she is given respect and esteem and stands a good chance of becoming a village elder. Of course, he/she would have to bear opportunity costs. He/She cannot NOT come home. There is no bond but few in those circumstances would turn his/her back on family and friends to pursue an esoteric interest that serves only his/her individual interests.

Singapore is no longer a village, and its people no longer live from hand-to-mouth. Nonetheless, the fundamental principles that underlies the scholarship system should not be any different. Scholarships are not meant to give individual benefit to scholars and their families. Scholarships are selectively given to individuals who are meant to help Singapore and Singaporeans move towards a better future.

As such, scholarships are not meant to divide a "have" from a "have-not". Scholarships are meant to ensure that eventually, everyone (scholar or non-scholar) moves towards a state of "have-a-lot". Even the cleaner that clears the toilet in the food court has a stake in our scholarship system. A proportion of the salary that scholars draw come from the salaries of the humblest Singaporeans drawing the tiniest pay, buy goods and pay GST. Even the toilet cleaner has a right to comment.

It is also not entirely accurate to make a rigid and impermeable distinction between the various different types of scholars. No organization is so foolish (and no village is so foolish) as to continuously

invest in and respect a scholar who lives life purely for self-gain. If I am not wrong, there is at least one President's Scholar who didn't get promoted in almost a decade whilst the poly grads around him/her have gone up and way ahead.

Scholarships are an investment in potential. I buy some rare and expensive seeds for my garden. I pay top dollar for them because they have potential to grow into strong, hardy and useful plants. I plant them in seed trays and watch over them. Those that don't germinate are culled. Those that grow stunted are also culled. In their place, I sometimes plant little seedlings that pop up in my garden elsewhere... landed there from the droppings of some random bird. These are free seeds but once I can discern their potential to contribute to my garden, I will help them to grow. They'll get the choicest spots in my garden and they'll get first pick of the fertilisers.

Why would I waste more time and effort on those expensive seeds that help no one? The money was spent, I can't get it back but I certainly won't spend anymore on them!! Hence, as a scholar, the last thing I would do is to denigrate non-scholars or so-called "lesser scholars" because the least among us can become great... and the greatest among us can become nothing at all.

Besides that, scholarships come with a burden of civic responsibility and the continuous need to prove your worth at every turn, or a scholar risks being culled. It isn't easy to be a scholar. The system is ruthless in its performance appraisal... and culling is just as ruthless. So, we really shouldn't be pointing fingers at each other and saying "You're a have-not" and "I am a have". Because a "have" can very well become a "have not" next year, when the wrong attitude to service is discerned or suspected.

And I don't really see what this notion of "have" is all about. Compared to the scions of the large entrepreneurial families in Singapore, scholars can be construed as "have nots". I'd sooner choose to be the eldest son of BreadTalk's founder. Parents don't cull their children even if they demonstrate some less than desirable attitudes... and especially not eldest sons.

At the end of the day, whomever we are and whichever the university we went to, and whichever the scholarship we have (or have not), we should be joining hands and reconciling differences rather than deepening fault lines. We should be using this thread to provide constructive feedback that can improve the system, rather than using strong and derogatory language to belittle other fellow Singaporeans. Yu-Mei wrote a great piece, and Tan Pin Pin started a useful discussion. It should not be allowed to degenerate into name-calling.

Such online behavior is very unbecoming of any who is a scholar, was a scholar or is the family member of a scholar. BECAUSE we are scholars and associated with scholars, we must set ourselves high standards of gentlemanly/ladylike behavior.



I'm not sure, but perhaps the editor could consider deleting such posts entirely to manage the length of this thread and the quality of the discussion. After all, this is a thread that could potentially have some social and policy impact if the quality of the discussion is good enough. It is distracting to have to plough through streams of personal invective to get at the nuggets of reasonableness.

#149 Tanequil 2009/08/10 at 9:49pm

Many thanks to Ms Yu-Mei for such an insightful commentary on an important subject such as this.

As an aspiring J1 student in an IP school, I might be jumping the gun a little by starting to think about what I want to do in the future. However, regardless of what field I am interested to head into, there is one fact that constantly comes to mind, that of \$\$.

My family sits rather comfortably in the middle income group, so it is possible that they could fork out the money required for me to go overseas. But I do not wish for that to happen. After all, that would be using their hard-earned money to do something that I can, and should earn by myself. (I have a younger brother and we do not have the money to support the both of us through what will be very costly overseas education.)

I will admit that I considered scholarships, but being an ardent Science student, the scholarship options to pursue research are limited, as far as I know, to two main scholarships, A\*STAR and DSTA. Both their bonds are lengthy and I suddenly found myself wondering "What if I go to (insert university here), and then decide I don't like what I'm doing? What happens to the 6 years of my life after that?"

I made my decision then and decided that if I attended a foreign university, it would be on some form of financial aid from said university. (Yes, I am perfectly aware exactly how difficult this will be.) If not, NUS will be the way to go. After all, my mother has a friend from her time in NUS who went on to do sponsored and un-bonded Post-grad studies in the US of A and end up happily teaching at a top French University, married with two children. She (my mother) always said, and still always says, "You don't have to worry about having nowhere to go, just worry that you're not good enough."

So, to round up a pretty long post, just a shout out to people who might be feeling a little overwhelmed, that there are tons of students in the US who take student loans to tide them through (although this, as far as I've heard, is NOT recommended), and there are the luckier ones still who get into colleges where their fees are fully paid for. I know at least two seniors of mine who have their fees fully paid for.

And one of them is headed to a very, very prestigious college indeed. :)

#150 Jurong NUS English Graduate 2009/08/10 at 10:45pm

[@Tanequil](#)

You can try applying to liberal arts colleges or smaller private universities. In the US, there are plenty of \*real\* scholarships to go around, even for international students. If you are good enough academically, the universities will pay you (instead of you paying them) to be one of their students. Don't worry about \*prestige\*; it is a non-issue. The statistical correlation between SAT scores and subsequent career earnings is much stronger than the correlation between university ranking and subsequent career earnings. Anyway, starting salaries are much higher (2 to 3 times higher) in the United States than in Singapore.

If you are an ardent Science student, then many of the liberal arts colleges provide excellent undergraduate education with plenty of research opportunities.

#151 IdealisticDreamer 2009/08/10 at 11:35pm

Just to throw in my own perspective as a PSC scholar currently halfway through my six-year bond: a lot depends on the job appointment that one ends up in, and where in the vast public service hierarchy one is at.

In my first two years in the public service, I honestly felt I had one of the best jobs in the world—I was doing what I loved, with supportive bosses and a great work environment, and had the satisfaction of knowing that my work was making a small but meaningful contribution towards the well-being of our nation (not just some company's financial bottom line).

Early in my third year, however, I was promoted to a managerial position. I was still in the same organisation, but now reported to different bosses and worked with different colleagues, and the nature of my work responsibilities was completely different from my earlier role as an individual contributor. And almost overnight, my whole perception of my work changed dramatically.

All the long-rumoured office politics started becoming a first-hand reality in my daily work life, and my job became less about serving the public and more about meeting the whims of "higher management". Instead of going out and getting work done on the ground, I was continually shuttling from one bureaucratic meeting to another and, yes, occasionally tending to "special assignments" like serving as a staff officer to high-ranking government officials or giving high-profile briefings to the aforementioned "higher management". The latter tasks, I was told, were intended to provide me with higher-level exposure to benefit my own development, and to provide opportunities for me to demonstrate my "potential". Ah, the wonderful perks of being a scholar.

I hate my job now.

The work I did as an entry-level public servant? Now *that* was the kind of personally fulfilling and meaningful work that I had signed up for as an idealistic 19 year old. And, yes, it really did turn out to be as enjoyable as I'd been promised.

But after my "promotion", I was suddenly thrust into a whole different side of the public service. A side that has severely disappointed and disillusioned me, to say the least. Yes, as a scholar I am conscious that I'm being fast-tracked to higher appointments in the public service. And, yes, I know it is a privilege that I should be very thankful for. But this is not what I want to do. Day by day, I feel my spirit being sapped as my early idealism and passion become slowly but surely replaced with cynicism and indifference.

And I still have another three years to go, thanks to my bond.

So here's yet another word of caution to all students considering a government scholarship: a "well-mapped career with many advancement opportunities" may well be a curse rather a boon. Even if you're not prepared to become just another dutiful cog in the government bureaucratic machine, you'll be forced into that mould anyway as part of your "leadership development".

Incidentally, if you're wondering why you always hear such good things from returned scholars at scholarship tea sessions and informal social meet-ups, I believe it's not because they're being dishonest or deceptive. Rather, it's because of ignorance. Most scholars at these sessions are recent-returned scholars who are still blissfully excited about their front-line duties—and unaware of the crushing demands of the later stages of their careers. Not too long ago, I myself was one of those individuals happily—and genuinely—extolling the joys of my work to JC students and urging them to join me as a government scholar. You won't hear such words from me now. But do forgive my younger colleagues; they mean well, but alas they don't know what lies ahead of them.

#152 Petunia Lee 2009/08/11 at 7:56am

Tanequil, Jurong NUS and IdealisticDreamer... thank you for your informative, well developed and well-written sharing. I learnt something.

#153 Bernard 2009/08/11 at 4:41pm

[@IdealisticDreamer](#)

Really appreciate your very frank sharing. Hope you won't get into trouble for your comments, as a current serving scholar.

Unfortunately, your experience seems to be all too common among my government scholar friends. Many of them enter the civil service full of passion and dreams about making a difference in society, only to eventually be let down by the system and its pettiness. Far from the stereotype of a self-centred and ungrateful scholar, they really do want to serve out their bond and give back to society. But the ugly reality of daily life as a mid-level civil servant ends up bogging them down in meaningless busywork and distasteful political posturing. Is it any wonder, then, that many of them eventually leave the system bitter and broken?

This is a story that really needs to be told more often. It's nothing short of tragic. I'm sure the ministers and top civil servants have no intention of stifling and crushing their scholars' spirits. But somehow the system they administer tends to do that, nonetheless.

Having said that, I still wish you all the best as you continue your civil service career. Stay strong and don't let the system overwhelm you. If need be, look for ways to change your current situation and put yourself back in a position where your passion will be reignited once again. Easier said than done, of course. But don't let yourself be miserable for the next three years!

#154 Petunia Lee 2009/08/11 at 8:06pm

Hmmmm... maybe that is where the person-organization misfit is? Scholar recruitment looks specifically for those with a passion and a mind of their own... scholar management however, manages scholars and expects obedience and blind faith. Oh well... just a thought.

Anyway, IdealisticDreamer... don't let your spirit die.

In every life and every organization, the way up comprises stops and milestones that one may not enjoy. I don't much enjoy some of the things I have to do... but there are still things to learn, friends to make and for many, working through other people is a way to make a bigger impact than you can as an individual contributor.

I don't know if this helps, but could it be a bit like learning chinese calligraphy? You go through bootcamp and blindly reproduce the art of past masters until you are learned enough to create your own art (or dictate policy)? It isn't much fun whilst you're in bootcamp. Persist longer and you will come to a place where you can freely express yourself... but by then, you can express yourself with

discipline and precision and in perfect co-ordination with the rest of the organization, since you have gone through the bootcamp of junior management. Again... just a thought.

If it's any comfort, even in private sector organizations, people find difficult and un-enjoyable the transition from individual contributor to first-line manager. The problem is not limited to the civil service. Now, THIS is not just a thought. It's true. Check out the book "Leadership Pipeline" by Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter and James Noel. These authors wrote about MNCs. It might give you some insights into your situation... and some ideas how to improve it?

All the best.

#155 Tanequil 2009/08/11 at 8:59pm

[@Jurong NUS English Graduate](#)

Thanks for the lovely suggestions!

I'm actually considering some of the not-so-prestigious colleges out there as well. Prestige doesn't really matter that much to me, I guess. [I'd be lying if I were to say it didn't matter, but hey... I'm human too. :P]

The liberal arts system actually intrigues me because I've always liked choice, and it's nothing but choice. And undergrad research is always a fantastic bonus, but we'll see. I still have about under a year to go to making decisions like that. I'm currently snooping around and scouting out stuff I'm interested in. :)

#156 Jurong NUS English Graduate 2009/08/11 at 10:37pm

[@Tanequil](#)

Money is an important issue to many Singaporean students but it is not too great a problem to surmount. There are many good Liberal Arts Colleges (LAC) in the US.

I will let you in on a secret: many public organization scholars, even the PSC ones, sent to US universities feel cheated after they discover the availability of various financial aid schemes. The disappointment grows after they discover the disparity in starting salaries between Singapore and the US. Many of today's A-level school leavers are catching on to the possibility of financial aid and are no longer aiming for public organization scholarships.

While it is not easy to get aid from universities popular with the Singapore crowd, it is not at all difficult to get financial aid from less popular universities and LACs. The amount of financial aid you

get generally depends on your academically desirability. Less popular universities compete for academically superior students to help raise their academic profile. These students, of whom you probably are, rarely pay the sticker price (USD 30K to 45K) of their education in the latter institutions. They pay much less or even get a free ride.

To compete for financial aid from these institutions, you must give them a good reason to pay you to study. It is very much similar to a job hunt. You have to convince them that their communities will benefit from your tenure. Show them that you participate actively in ECA's, are passionate about your studies, give back to the community regularly, etc. It's all about selling yourself.

Good luck hunting.

#157 Dawn 2009/08/12 at 1:08am

Don, if I am the same person as someone else for calling you out and disagreeing with you, does it mean that you're the same person as the other 'two' rejects – Jimmy Mun and Fox?

Fox, I have no idea if he graduated top in the whole university but topping the department is the norm for many Singaporeans and considered a piece of cake, and he had consistently good results, like other PSC scholars who also top their schools routinely. PhD offers from professors are no big deal, because I remember there were a sizeable bunch of them who had them. I assume you're a graduate. Are you saying no one in these local universities were ever good enough to be offered PhD grants without active and desperate application on their part? That's interesting. Since I didn't attend a local university, this is an eye-opener.

Jurong NUS English Graduate, I have three questions to ask you.

First, besides describing the way you feel about Qian's writing, which doesn't really edify or entertain anyone, could you kindly point out who also writes like a non-native English speaker? After all, there is no point in talking about her alone, no one is that interested in her grammar. You can only go somewhere when you show us a semblance of recognisable pattern between her post and whoever you allege her to be.

Second, if it was so easy getting financial aid in these less desirable US colleges, something I don't disagree with, what happened to you? Why did you end up in NUS English? What does it say about NUS that takes in students that are unable to qualify for something in the US meant for applicants of lacklustre calibre? And what are you doing now? A teacher like so many of your schoolmates?

Third, the difference in starting salary of the jobs that an Ivy League graduate may get in the US and that of a PSC scholar narrows to sharp taper in his third year of service on.

The state should consider setting up a counselling service for the generations of scholarships rejects, as clearly the wounds and scars stay long after the rejection.

#158 Dawn 2009/08/12 at 1:14am

A note to all. The moderator knows full well who the posters are, and has posted a note to observer about using the same handle for consistency. Since his alertness and eagerness in carrying out his duties are evident, I know he's on the case. If anyone else among us is pretending to be another, he will call us out, just like any of us will call you and other lies out.

The handles used by observer are obviously connected to the respective post he's making, satiring the ignorance or agendas of 'farmers' like some here, so to speak.

Here's an example. Jurong NUS English Graduate, how you are unable to see that, is a good golly shocking surprise to me right now. So I may use the handle Good Golly to post that when mocking you. If someone wanted to try very hard to pretend to be different people, he'd not be ridiculing farmers in the same tone in consecutive posts timed tightly together, under handles meant to satire and ridicule. He was mocking you, in fact using "good grief" twice. I'm quite sure he probably doesn't care that you know who he is doing so.

And what would I do if I ended up doing English in NUS? I'd probably use my degree as toilet paper in the restroom. And I wouldn't know a taunt when it hit me on the face.

#159 Dawn 2009/08/12 at 1:35am

[IdealisticDreamer](#) :Just to throw in my own perspective as a PSC scholar currently halfway through my six-year bond: a lot depends on the job appointment that one ends up in, and where in the vast public service hierarchy one is at. In my first two years in the public service, I honestly felt I had one of the best jobs in the world—I was doing what I loved, with supportive bosses and a great work environment, and had the satisfaction of knowing that my work was making a small but meaningful contribution towards the well-being of our nation (not just some company's financial bottom line). Early in my third year, however, I was promoted to a managerial position. I was still in the same organisation, but

now reported to different bosses and worked with different colleagues, and the nature of my work responsibilities was completely different from my earlier role as an individual contributor. And almost overnight, my whole perception of my work changed dramatically.

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And I still have another three years to go, thanks to my bond.

So here's yet another word of caution to all students



considering a government scholarship: a “well-mapped career with many advancement opportunities” may well be a curse rather a boon. Even if you’re not prepared to become just another dutiful cog in the government bureaucratic machine, you’ll be forced into that mould anyway as part of your “leadership development”.

I am very sure you are who you say you are. The information that comes from you is credible.

My brother, along with his scholar peers, were put through ‘special’ duties are part of a grooming exercise for PSC scholars and regularly given opportunities to staff ministers, perm secs on trips, attend briefings and give presentations to the top brass outside of their ministry, and invited to tea session with ministers, prime ministers and other big-shots.

I can empathise with what you say about being shuffled through a systematic programme of leadership development. I know scholars who resist it, and just as many who not only embrace, but hanker for more of such opportunities.

What I can encourage you with, is perhaps the same thing I told my brother after speaking to seniors from JC who are also PSC scholars. There is a bigger picture you need to focus on. As a junior policy officer, you felt great rewards in public policy shaping at your last level, but that isn’t even the tip of the iceberg.

As you progress further, beyond the level you are at now, you will be, and only then, vested with the power and appointment needed to make substantive contributions. You want to be a change agent. All PSC scholars do. And do that and fulfil your calling, you need to have power. You need to earn it first. You need to be at a certain place in the framework to do that.

I don’t think Yong Ying-I or Koh Lin-Net could make as significant a contribution when they were middle managers like you, compared to the position they hold now. It is going through the systematic routine of talent development given to all PSC scholars that yield this finished product, that allows you to be in the optimum shape in your career to give your best to the nation.

Take heart and look at the big picture, the very same triat that the PSC interview panel saw in you. It’s that one big they look out for. So you know you have it.

It’s normal to feel moral ups and downs as one progresses in his career. All the best to you, and may you rediscover the passion in your calling again soon, God willing.

#160 Dawn 2009/08/12 at 2:11am

[Petunia Lee](#) :

[Qian](#) :</strong>Naysayers and have-nots can say what they want, write all the long rambling posts and essays they wish, the exceptional few who fell through the cracks can console themselves however they wish. Even those who think they're scholars but are not can delude their heart out! It all matters not.

I think it is dangerous and socially divisive to draw the line between the haves and have nots. Riots break out and people die when battle lines are thus drawn. To scream out that you have in another country where there are many many have-nots and little law and order, is an invitation to daylight robbery, kidnapping and rape. Let us not go in that direction. It is unbecoming of a scholar and of the members of a scholar's family to draw these lines. These lines go against every principle upon which the scholarship system is based. A scholarship is nothing more than a more evolved format of something that has existed in rural areas for a long time. The entire village pools funds together so that the brightest child in the village can go out into the larger world, obtain an education, grow in wisdom and strength... and come back to help/lead his fellow villagers towards a better life. That is why scholars are picked.

Naturally, when this child returns to the village, he/she is given respect and esteem and stands a good chance of becoming a village elder. Of course, he/she would have to bear opportunity costs. He/She cannot NOT come home. There is no bond but few in those circumstances would turn his/her back on family and friends to pursue an esoteric interest that serves only his/her individual interests. Singapore is no longer a village, and its people no longer live from hand-to-mouth. Nonetheless, the fundamental principles that underlies the scholarship system should not be any

different. Scholarships are not meant to give individual benefit to scholars and their families. Scholarships are selectively given to individuals who are meant to help Singapore and Singaporeans move towards a better future.

As such, scholarships are not meant to divide a "have" from a "have-not". Scholarships are meant to ensure that eventually, everyone (scholar or non-scholar) moves towards a state of "have-a-lot". Even the cleaner that clears the toilet in the food court has a stake in our scholarship system. A proportion of the salary that scholars draw come from the salaries of the humblest Singaporeans drawing the tiniest pay, buy goods and pay GST. Even the toilet cleaner has a right to comment. It is also not entirely accurate to make a rigid and impermeable distinction between the various different types of scholars. No organization is so foolish (and no village is so foolish) as to continuously invest in and respect a scholar who lives life purely for self-gain. If I am not wrong, there is at least one President's Scholar who didn't get promoted in almost a decade whilst the poly grads around him/her have gone up and way ahead.

Scholarships are an investment in potential. I buy some rare and expensive seeds for my garden. I pay top dollar for them because they have potential to grow into strong, hardy and useful plants. I plant them in seed trays and watch over them. Those that don't germinate are culled. Those that grow stunted are also culled. In their place, I sometimes plant little seedlings that pop up in my garden elsewhere... landed there from the droppings of some random bird. These are free seeds but once I can discern their potential to contribute to my garden, I will help them to grow. They'll get the choicest spots in my garden and they'll get first pick of the fertilisers. Why would I waste more time and effort on those expensive seeds that help no one? The money was spent, I can't get it back but I certainly won't spend anymore on them!! Hence, as

a scholar, the last thing I would do is to denigrate non-scholars or so-called "lesser scholars" because the least among us can become great... and the greatest among us can become nothing at all.

Besides that, scholarships come with a burden of civic responsibility and the continuous need to prove your worth at every turn, or a scholar risks being culled. It isn't easy to be a scholar. The system is ruthless in its performance appraisal... and culling is just as ruthless. So, we really shouldn't be pointing fingers at each other and saying "You're a have-not" and "I am a have". Because a "have" can very well become a "have not" next year, when the wrong attitude to service is discerned or suspected.

And I don't really see what this notion of "have" is all about. Compared to the scions of the large entrepreneurial families in Singapore, scholars can be construed as "have nots". I'd sooner choose to be the eldest son of BreadTalk's founder. Parents don't cull their children even if they demonstrate some less than desirable attitudes... and especially not eldest sons.

At the end of the day, whomever we are and whichever the university we went to, and whichever the scholarship we have (or have not), we should be joining hands and reconciling differences rather than deepening fault lines. We should be using this thread to provide constructive feedback that can improve the system, rather than using strong and derogatory language to belittle other fellow Singaporeans. Yu-Mei wrote a great piece, and Tan Pin Pin started a useful discussion. It should not be allowed to degenerate into name-calling. Such online behavior is very unbecoming of any who is a scholar, was a scholar or is the family member of a scholar. BECAUSE we are scholars and associated with scholars, we must set ourselves high standards of gentlemanly/ladylike behavior. P>

Well-said. You are most correct that everyone benefits from the grooming of our leaders.

Scholars are picked for their ability to think out of the box and stand out from a crowd, and be their own person on their terms and eschew a herd mentality. They commonly possess traits like confidence and outspoken candour to stand up for what they believe.

I've not seen a single person in this space who disputed that the creation of a scholar is first and foremost about the betterment that he brings. No scholar I know, argues against that.

It's one thing to know that instinctively, and that which is common sense. It's another to stand by and not say a word about the alleged 'mistreatment' of scholars and not to give your own testimony of the scholar experience and attached opportunities against the claims made by dubious sources so far.

If I make a claim, any kind of claim or say my take on an issue on the internet, I leave myself open to scrutiny, and when you come along and had a different experience from what I claim, you have every right to voice it.

The have and have-nots are not meant to be divisive or label anyone as the numero uno. It's only brought in as a response to bad behaviour like accusing others of being another, or baseless 'insights' on an issue you're not privy to. What can you say about a scholar's experience, if you're not one?

Instead of have or have-nots, I prefer to use insider and outsider. And I think that's much more accurate as well. All information has to stand up to scrutiny.

Breadtalk is an empty investment shell, give me the bosses of property conglomerates like FEO anytime. :)

I see good and opportunity in all things. On the contrary to what's said here, I think it's a blessing and a good turn if indeed more people know about financial aids and I would like the information to be more widespread.

This is because, the knowledge and aids will act as a natural sieve, efficiently ridding every single top talent less than dedicated and passionate about public service from the pool of PSC scholarship applicants.

This will in turn, work towards a lower and eventually nil (God willing) attrition rate, a positive scholar corps, fully made up of genuine and passionate scholars who truly seek public service for its good, and not just to pay for a prestigious university education.

#161 (E)X-PSC 2009/08/12 at 3:12am

[@IdealisticDreamer](#)

It is easy to be disillusioned about a system so large and complex, which you feel powerless to change. During my time I have seen scholars deal with this in different ways:

- a) The lucky few found that the system and its procedures suited them with minimal adjustment, and did well. Some might have found their calling.
- b) Some realised that being a Public Servant was not for them — or at least not going to be their lifetime occupation. Nevertheless, they tried their best to contribute and learn.
- c) Others grew cynical and critical of the system, thinking it was unchangeable and hopeless. They started looking for ways out.
- d) A number might have been critical at first, but worked within the system, expressing their alternative ideas within the framework of the system. They restrained their ideals somewhat, and perhaps became more “politically-aware”.

The 120,000-strong Singapore Public Service is a 100+ year-old institution inherited from the British colonial government. Like any large, long-lived organisation, it has an intricate web of rules, practices and mindsets through which myself, my fellow scholars and non-scholars found bewildering and difficult to navigate.

Administrative duties, internal “politics” and even busywork happened from time to time — or sometimes very often, depending on the the type of superior you had. You can choose to see this as necessary within a large organisation, or you can see this as baggage which needs to be done away with.

The leadership has often called for change, and indeed there have been many honest, determined attempts to do that. The reality is that change takes time and tremendous effort. Although some enlightened bosses were open to all suggestions — I am grateful to them — often radical new ideas were laughed at, explained as difficult to implement, “thanks and noted” or simply ignored. It seems Public Officers are still tight-lipped when asked for honest suggestions to improve the way things work. As young scholars, we found this difficult to get used to.

The PSC selected you because they saw in you a desire to benefit your fellow Singaporeans. Keep this flame burning. As highlighted by [Dawn](#), you can work your way up and improve the system. Within the terms of your scholarship, you have the choice of secondment, transfer, etc. to something more suitable for you — though this might entail giving up some benefits.

Taking a wider view, the MAP and the AS — or even the Public Service — are not the only ways for you to serve Singapore. Singapore is more than the PAP, the government, the Public Service or even your citizenship status. Think big.

#162 Jurong NUS English Graduate 2009/08/12 at 10:08am

@Dawn,

I graduated from NUS in the mid 90's. We didn't have ready access to internet during our time and didn't know our options very well. Three years of NUS was plenty enough for me as I had to work through college. I eventually got another diploma for professional reasons but that is another story.

I don't know where you got the idea that I am a school teacher. I have never been a government employee. There's really a lot you can do with an English degree.

I found my NUS degree in English to be immensely useful at the beginning of my career. It led me to my first real job which involved the instruction of English communication skills to students and professionals. I should point out here that the Civil Service College frequently utilized my services. Apparently, the CSC did not think too shabbily of my toilet paper degree – they signed up many of their officers to learn their sibilants and dental fricatives from me. Yes, even the ones educated in those ivory towers of the American eastern seaboard had to be taught the rudiments of English writing and speaking. It makes you wonder how they spent their years in college.

I now run my own education consultancy firm in an Asian country and happily export shiploads of students to Singapore, Australia, the US and the UK. No one cares about which schools I attended or what diplomas I have. When I occasionally meet someone from MTI or MOE, I can't tell if he's been to Harvard or Podunk University. He can be an ITE graduate for all I care. These things are simply irrelevant to my business.

#163 Petunia Lee 2009/08/12 at 2:26pm

QUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

"The have and have-nots are not meant to be divisive or label anyone as the numero uno.... What can you say about a scholar's experience, if you're not one?

Instead of have or have-nots, I prefer to use insider and outsider."

UNQUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

I thought about it. Even with a change in terminology I cannot agree with you. It goes against everything I have been taught to advocate a policy/attitude of exclusion. I am Chinese and he is not. Therefore he has no right to comment on the privileges/mistreatment of the Chinese? Result: Racial riots.

I am British and he is not. Therefore he has no right to comment on the privileges/mistreatment of the British colonial masters? Result: Bloody fights for national independence.

I am a scholar and he is not. Therefore he has no right to comment on the privileges/mistreatment of scholars? Possible Result (1): Voters say no to the scholarship system. Possible Result (2): Non-scholars in the civil service develop a negative bias towards scholars making it hard for them to progress to a level where they CAN make a difference... Note that many people who sit in the ranking boards of junior scholars are non-scholars.

Scholars help to run a country, not a country club. Exclusivity and exclusion is not quite appropriate. You can't shut people up and not get a negative backlash. What would Singaporeans do, I wonder if the government went around putting people like Mr Brown in jail because he makes comment on the government whilst not being in government... and therefore can be said to be not credible enough to comment.

QUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

Well-said. You are most correct that everyone benefits from the grooming of our leaders.

UNQUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

Everyone benefits ONLY if the leaders do not advocate a policy of exclusion. Otherwise, only the leaders benefit.

QUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

Scholars are picked for their ability to think out of the box and stand out from a crowd, and be their own person on their terms and eschew a herd mentality. They commonly possess traits like confidence and outspoken candour to stand up for what they believe.

UNQUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

Intellectual capability (think out of the box... confidence)... What happened to qualities of the heart – generosity, capacity to care, a drive to serve? If I am not wrong, these qualities are also what scholars are recruited for... It is people like IdealisticDreamer who are precious: gifted with qualities of both the mind and the heart.



QUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

I've not seen a single person in this space who disputed that the creation of a scholar is first and foremost about the betterment that he brings. No scholar I know, argues against that.

UNQUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

I do. I dispute that. The creation of a scholar brings about betterment ONLY if this scholar does not pursue a policy of exclusion.

QUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

'mistreatment' of scholars

UNQUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

Mistreatment? What mistreatment? We've been well-treated. More than one landed home, 2 cars, kids in top schools, huge opportunities to make a difference in others' lives, opportunities for postgrad, one or two year long training stints abroad... All this, on top of 4 years of free education in an overseas institution as an undergrad. Where is the mistreatment in that? We're not the eldest son of Breadtalk founder, but treatment is not bad at all. Can't do the Milan circuit every season but well...

QUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

And what would I do if I ended up doing English in NUS? I'd probably use my degree as toilet paper in the restroom. And I wouldn't know a taunt when it hit me on the face.

UNQUOTE Dawn\_\_\_\_\_

Why stoop to such insults? Disagree if you must, but why stoop to the depths of toilet humour?

In summary, scholars who make it are well-treated not mis-treated. But to make it in the system, one must demonstrate qualities of generosity, patience, humility and persistence on top of intellectual capability. It isn't just the system that needs to perform. Scholars need to perform too.

No doubt, the system can improve in its scholar management but I guess it is just being kiasu in its culling exercise. Scholar culling is ruthless because the system deserves the best. It is dreadful to think what can happen when a leader rises to the top who advocates a policy of exclusion.

#164 organicfarmer 2009/08/15 at 12:25am

Really nice article, kudos to yu-mei...what spoiled my read are some replies with that disturbing Sillyporeans kiasu-self-righteousness combo-ed with irritating amount condescension. No doubt you got an excellent overseas education but guess some of you didn't learn much.

The main gist of the article is about giving 19-year-olds more information before signing on the dotted line, which is truly lacking in the current scheme of things.(oh yah, I used to observe that on an almost daily basis) Of course this is a live-and-death race to secure Singapore's only resource – human talent so too much thinking is not good for them or us.

By reading some of the replies and equating to the typical top "bureaucracy" mindset our gahmen is grooming, then guess I am perfectly at peace deciding to relocate myself to be a REAL organic farmer. Singapore is such a nice country to visit once in a while...

And sorry if I offended your scholar-ly mind, I am just a organic farmer...out from your "elite uncaring face" ...yawn.

#165 Liz 2009/08/15 at 7:45pm

Thanks Yu Mei, for being so honest with your feelings. Your article touched me to the core. I could still remember myself signing on the dotted line at 18, and I remembered that the atmosphere was tense, the room was cold, and the administrators distant. The only people who felt satisfied that day were probably my parents. I am not about to mourn my years in service, because I belonged to those who served out the bond and then took on another one. Of course, by the time I took on the second scholarship, I was older and wiser, and learnt how to negotiate the terms until it was satisfactory to me. Yet I still have sleepless nights thinking, what would I have done if I didn't take on the scholarship the first time round?

But even if I had all the information in the world, nothing would have mattered to me more at that moment, than the opinion of my parents. I think that is what happened to your student. Being chinese, and young, many times we tend to trust that our parents know best. But do they really know best? They too, are limited by their understanding of the world. And how many teenagers out there would be independent enough not to take counsel of their parents at 18? And how many parents out there would be enlightened enough to support freedom over security? I really do not know, even as a parent myself, what my response would be like if my child is blessed enough to receive a bonded scholarship together with an unbonded one. We'll see...

#166 edwin 2009/08/16 at 3:26am

I am curious about the calls for more information about a job in the civil service before students sign the bond– I feel that the civil service has been more than forthcoming with information. After all, you already know about the 6 (or 4) years of bond, you know the area in which you'd be working (or you will be exposed through attachments and can then decide) and you know the chances that you will be taking on the working environment– which is exactly the same chance you take when you join any new company. Do private companies not have politicking and backstabbing?

The lamentations of the author in her change of heart during her studies are valid, and relevant, however. This seems to be a common call among many scholars, and probably indicates a failure on the part of the organisation– to either select the right person for the scholarship, or to nurture the scholars and continue to engage and inspire them during their studies. I would like to hear from the author if she agrees with my analysis, and what she feels could be done better on the part of any organisation to align the vision of their scholars with the organisational goals. After all, it is not in the organisation's interest to retain and continue to pay a disillusioned or disinterested scholar, nor is it in the scholar's interest to work in what he or she feels is a dead end job.

#167 Sam 2009/08/16 at 9:54pm

I would like to have seen more discussion about the inequity between oversea PSC scholars and non-oversea-PSC civil servants. The extremely high-paying jobs for those in the Admin Service (I think, at one band of the super-scale, pegged to the 15th top income earning Person at 30 years old), sounds ridiculous, considering how "risk-free" the job is, vis-a-vis the vicariousness of a high-flying job in finance, say. The fact that the civil service has so much trust in selection of students at 18 for high-flying, high-paying posts sounds ridiculous. It makes a mockery of the hard work of non-oversea-PSC civil servants who are excluded from the top spots.

On another note, I've heard that for the JC2 2007 batch of President Scholars, all four were Christians and already knew members of the Selection Committee for President Scholarships through church. My impression was that that the selection committee members' knowledge of these students help to sway things in the favour of those students. Could anyone shed more light on this?

#168 edwin 2009/08/16 at 11:12pm

Sam– what inequity are you talking about? I don't think that non-overseas PSC civil servants are excluded from the top posts per-se, it is just that the selection process gives overseas PSC scholarships to students of a higher calibre, who are more likely to succeed.

The second part of your post is more troubling though, do you have any evidence to support your claims?

#169 Qian 2009/08/17 at 9:44am

Oh my I was away for a week long spa trip and didn't expect to come back to this joke.

Dawn, let me tell you a secret. And it's not generally this case but ALWAYS. People who resort to picking on the English of their adversaries on the net do so because/when they're scrapping the bottom of the barrel and desperation hits. It's a cheapskate way to get out of the stage alive and hopefully saving some skin.

It's true that I am not Singapore born, although now I am a full-fledged Singapore citizen. I am Hong Kong born and went to the US for college, it was in the country where I met my husband who was studying in a top college. Does that make me a non English speaker? Perhaps since I am not Anglo Saxon ethnically. By the way, did you know that you are also NOT a native English speaker? Are you aware that no one here is probably a native English speaker? Do go ask your ex professor what constitutes a native speaker because I'm very sure you do not know what it means.

It's indeed true that a local education, though already very cheap, gives poor value for money. Please don't use words or turn of phrases you don't understand, or give 'insights' you're not privy to. It is so embarrassing.

#170 s/pores 2009/08/17 at 10:05am

[@Qian](#)

Qian and Dawn, now that Qian had rebutted, let's move on and focus on the issue at hand. Please continue the discussion on language nativity somewhere else, and let's try not to disparage local education or graduates from local universities without evidence, the latter being the fine line between condescension and informed opinion.

#171 Sam 2009/08/17 at 9:36pm

Hi Edwin,

I heard the information about the President scholars knowing people on the Selection committee from one of the involved parties. It was probably not in the best interests of said person to mention it, but I appreciate the person's frankness.

As to the inequity I perceive in the system, I would love to be rebutted, but from the scholars/non-scholar civil servants I talk to, there seems to be agreement with me on the point.

#172 21 grams 2009/08/18 at 2:01am

[Sam](#): I would like to have seen more discussion about the inequity between oversea PSC scholars and non-oversea-PSC civil servants. The extremely high-paying jobs for those in the Admin Service (I think, at one band of the super-scale, pegged to the 15th top income earning Person at 30 years old), sounds ridiculous, considering how "risk-free" the job is, vis-a-vis the vicariousness of a high-flying job in finance, say. The fact that the civil service has so much trust in selection of students at 18 for high-flying, high-paying posts sounds ridiculous. It makes a mockery of the hard work of non-oversea-PSC civil servants who are excluded from the top spots.

On another note, I've heard that for the JC2 2007 batch of President Scholars, all four were Christians and already knew members of the Selection Committee for President Scholarships through church. My impression was that that the selection committee members' knowledge of these students help to sway things in the favour of those students. Could anyone shed more light on this?

~~Fail.~~

Firstly, please go check the meaning of "vicariousness" before using it in any sentence. ~~Someone's~~

~~obviously trying to mask his language deficiencies and trying too hard to use big words like that and "vis a vis". LOL~~

Secondly, there were 5 PS not 4 last year. Thirdly, either you can back up your claims or you're committing slander. Pick one.

#173 edwin 2009/08/18 at 5:48am

[@IQ is relative!](#) [Editor's Note: Original comments between #173 and #172 were removed]

Well said– no doubt Civil service scholarships of all kinds must have been fairly successful to be continued; our Government is not in the habit of giving free lunches, which is a good thing.

However my point still stands– the awarding of scholarship to a person is bound together with the expectation that said person would continue to serve in the public sector, even after their bond. If a person leaves because it is fundamentally not something for them, or because they are not as talented as their results might indicate, then the scholarship board probably made a mistake in selection. If a person leaves because of disillusionment, then the system should be improved to prevent it.

Either way, things remain to be improved, would you not agree?

#174 s/pores 2009/08/18 at 8:19am

Editors' note 3.

We have no personal agenda (only a collective one which can be read in the "about" page) and no collective position on the scholarship issue. We have mixed individual views on most of the articles we publish, including Yu-Mei's. Agreement with the author's view is not a criterion we use, please take some time to read about our journal aims and policy in the "about" page.

We have been actively deleting posts that do not show respect for civil conversation and put down others or groups of people. It so happens that many of these posts tend to be posted by people who seek to vigorously defend the government's scholarship policy, past and present. Defend it if you must; there is no need to denigrate your opponents in the debate and get personal. It is common sense and basic civility, even if you think your worldview is superior. If you are thrown out of our space, it is because you are persistently disrespectful; there is no conspiracy and you know who we are, even while you remain anonymous.

As the debate is winding down and losing its focus, with certain folks getting personal and not moving on from reiterated positions, we will close the comments thread in a few days' time, unless new arguments are put forth. Thank you all for a lively and educational debate.