ISSUES	EDUCATION

Possible Essay Questions

1. Is formal education necessary now that we can learn independently in the digital age?
2. Does being educated always make one's life better?
3. 'Many receive an education, but few are educated.' Discuss with reference to your society.

Do We Value Formal Education Today?

Structured Guidance

The **21st Century Competencies (21CC) Framework**, established by **Singapore's Ministry of Education**, highlights the necessity of equipping students with both the **moral grounding and adaptive skills** required to thrive in an increasingly complex world. By cultivating **core values** such as respect, integrity, and resilience, alongside **social-emotional competencies** like responsible decision-making and relationship management, the framework ensures that education nurtures not only intellect but **character**. These elements are thoughtfully embedded within a structured learning environment—one that intentionally guides students toward becoming confident individuals and active, **empathetic contributors to society**. In contrast to self-directed learning, formal education also provides a **deliberate and calibrated path compatible with the modern economy**. The 21CC framework integrates **emerging competencies—such as critical thinking, adaptability, and global literacy**—that are crucial in a volatile and fast-changing world. Such competencies are not easily self-taught; they require context, feedback, and mentorship. Formal education, by offering this scaffolding, becomes not merely a transmission of knowledge but a transformative journey.

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Lacking in Flexibility

The rapid integration of AI tools like ChatGPT into education signals a profound shift in how students approach learning—one that reveals the limitations of formal education in comparison to technology-driven alternatives. According to a **2024 poll by Impact Research for the Walton Family Foundation**, **75% of K–12 students** in the United States are now familiar with ChatGPT, and **nearly half use it weekly**, reflecting a swift uptake of AI as a go-to resource for academic and creative tasks. More than **70% of students** report favourable views of AI chatbots, citing their usefulness for writing, studying, and self-directed learning. As highlighted by a **2024 report from the Harvard Graduate School of Education**, teens are turning to AI not just for academic support, but also for **asking questions they might hesitate to pose to adults**, fostering independence and confidence in their learning journeys. AI offers what formal education often cannot: **flexibility, accessibility, and personalisation**. Its ability to provide **real-time feedback** and adapt to individual learning styles means it can meet students where they are—regardless of pace or background. This is particularly significant for **underserved groups**, with **2024 data showing Black and Hispanic students using AI at higher rates than their peers,** suggesting that such tools may help close long-standing educational gaps.

Bulwark against Misinformation

Singapore

4 in 5 Singapore students under 18 want media literacy classes: Study

While technology and the internet have revolutionised access to information, offering tools that facilitate learning, this **abundance does not guarantee the accuracy or reliability of the content consumed**. A **2024 survey by BBC Bitesize and BBC Radio 5 Live** revealed that over half of 13- to 18-year-olds are **concerned about fake news**, with 36% admitting to using AI technology for homework or coursework. The proliferation of misinformation, particularly on social media platforms, emphasises the necessity for critical evaluation skills to discern credible information from falsehoods. In Singapore, the challenge of misinformation is similarly pressing. **A 2024 survey by Milieu Insight found that over 60% of youths under 18 have encountered fake news**, predominantly on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Consequently**, nearly four in five students desired to incorporate media literacy classes into their school curriculum**. This indicates a recognition among young people of the importance of equipping themselves with the skills to assess the information they encounter online critically.

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Has Education Improved Our Lives?

Social Mobility

Education plays a vital role in **enhancing social mobility** by equipping individuals **with the skills, knowledge, and qualifications** needed to access higher-paying and more stable employment. **A 2024 study by the University of Bristol's School of Economics**, using long-term data from the UK's National Child Development Study, found that **parental time investment in early education**—such as reading to children and engaging in learning activities—was a major determinant of adult earnings. It accounted for **24% of intergenerational earnings elasticity for women and 28% for men**, indicating that **early educational engagement can disrupt cycles of poverty and influence future income**. Globally, the link between education and social mobility is further illustrated in South Africa, where access to quality education is crucial in addressing entrenched inequality. A **2018 World Bank report** showed that over **90% of income inequality** in South Africa was attributed to disparities in labour market outcomes, which in turn **were tied to differences in educational attainment**.

Gruelling Process of Education

While education is often celebrated as a force for social mobility, in many societies it functions less as a means of learning and more as a mechanism for allocating scarce opportunities—such as elite university places and high-paying jobs—to the most competitive. This is starkly illustrated in **South Korea**, where academic success is viewed as a prerequisite for future prosperity. Students face extreme pressure, often studying up to **16 hours a day**, attending school by day and cram schools (hagwons) by night. This intense competition has led to a nationwide **mental health crisis**, with **suicide being the leading cause of death among Korean teenagers**. The system, far from nurturing intellectual growth, has become a **battleground where the cost of failure is devastating**, both emotionally and socially. The

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burden extends beyond students. Parents, too, are caught in the cycle—pouring time, money, and emotional energy into their children's academic pursuits in a desperate bid to secure their future.

Necessary but not sufficient

Even though education is undeniably important, **it does not in itself guarantee a good life**. **Tunisia**, for instance, boasts one of the **highest education levels in Africa, with a literacy rate exceeding 80% and strong tertiary enrolment figures**. Yet it simultaneously suffers from one of the **highest youth unemployment rates in the region, reaching 37.48% in 2023**. This paradox reveals that while education is a necessary foundation, it is not sufficient on its own. A good **life also depends on a functioning economy, stable governance, and equitable access to employment opportunities**. Without meaningful job creation, skills-matching, and economic reform, education can lead to disillusionment, as graduates struggle to apply their knowledge in stagnant or inequitable labour markets. Thus, education must be paired with systemic support, such as inclusive economic policy and social infrastructure, to truly uplift lives.

Do Societal Trends Affect the Outcome Of Education?

Learning Beyond the Classroom

Singapore's progressive education system champions holistic development by embedding values-based learning into real-world application. Central to this is the **Values in Action (VIA) programme**, a compulsory national initiative replacing the earlier **Community Involvement Programme in 2012**, with a greater emphasis on developing **empathy, social awareness, and a sense of responsibility**. Through VIA, student**s identify community issues, propose meaningful solution**s, and **engage in projects** that benefit society while reflecting on their values and experiences. For instance, **Catholic Junior College students organised a camp for children from low-income families**, learning firsthand the emotional

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sensitivities of their young participants and realising the importance of not stereotyping individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, **Anglo-Chinese Junior College students led "Project Cheer"**, facilitating intergenerational bonding between children and the elderly, which inspired deeper personal reflection and action, even beyond Singapore. These experiences not only develop compassion but also leadership, tenacity, and initiative. When coupled with initiatives like the **Disability Sports Master Plan (DSMP) 2024**—which ensures **all students experience para-sports by 2028**—Singapore's progressive education model clearly aims to nurture globally minded citizens who can relate to, understand, and act on real-world challenges with empathy and resolve.

Meritocracy

Singapore's education system is widely regarded as meritocratic, **rewarding students based on academic performance and effort rather than socioeconomic background**. This principle aims to **offer equal opportunities** through national examinations, scholarships, and rigorous school standards, ensuring that advancement is ostensibly based on merit. However, while this system ensures a **fair and structured allocation of resources**, it also **entrenches a stratified mindset that equates academic success with personal worth**. Elite schools remain aspirational due to perceived advantages, despite efforts to level the playing field. A **2016 report by the Singapore Children's Society revealed that students across primary and secondary schools believed those from elite schools held a higher social status**. This perception feeds into a c**ulture of elitism**, where "winners" of the system are often viewed as superior**, fuelling classism and prejudice against those from neighbourhood schools**. Despite reforms like **subject-based banding and efforts to de-emphasise streaming labels**, the systemic emphasis on ranking persists, shaped by forums, parental pressure, and school branding. In this environment, meritocracy, while well-intentioned, risks creating a zero-sum game where self-worth is tied to academic performance, undermining the very egalitarian ideals it seeks to uphold.

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Conservative Climate

Singapore's education system, while internationally lauded for its rigour and academic achievements, is also deeply rooted in conservatism, often **reflecting and reinforcing traditional social norms**. One example is its **sexuality education curriculum**, which remains firmly **anchored in the heterosexual family model**, as affirmed by Minister Masagos Zulkifli, who stated that the curriculum reflects prevailing national values, including **marriage between a man and a woman**. While this approach claims to be secular and evidence-based, its selective framing limits engagement with diverse lived realities, **especially those of LGBTQ individuals**. A **2016 report by AWARE** and ongoing feedback from students **reveal that sex education in schools often omits or glosses over LGBTQ topics, framing abstinence until (heterosexual) marriage as the gold standard**. This creates a **narrow moral lens through which students are encouraged to interpret identity, relationships, and social dynamics**—one that marginalises non-normative narratives. Consequently, students may emerge well-versed in academic disciplines, yet blinkered in their understanding of alternative perspectives and identities. This gap between intellectual development and socio-emotional inclusivity risks breeding intolerance and internalised prejudice, undermining the very empathy and openness that a holistic education ought to cultivate in an increasingly pluralistic world.

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