

Learning and Executive Development in Reforming the Singapore Public Service from 1959 to 2001¹

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Abstract

Based on the administrative history of learning and executive development in the Singapore Public Service, this paper argues that training can be employed as a means to introduce reforms into bureaucracies. Evidence from archival records and elite interviews points to the use of training to socialize a colonial-era rent-seeking bureaucracy into a Public Service primed for state-formation. Training was then used to drive reforms, from Singapore's transition into a developmental state to emplacing the bureaucracy into a trajectory of continuous change and relevance in the 21st century. The paper concludes by offering points of reference for bureaucracies aspiring reforms, in particular, the use of training and executive development as a tool for introducing reforms.

Keywords: Singapore Public Service, public administration, bureaucracy, learning and executive development, reforms, administrative history

Introduction

Significance and Scope of Study

Singapore's modernization from a colonial outpost to one of the most successful city-states is typically attributed to the political foresight and will of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP) government (Turnbull, 2009; Drysdale, 1984; Lam & Tan, 1999). Even critics of the Singapore political system acknowledged the central role played by Lee and his PAP colleagues in Singapore's transformation (Worthington, 2003; Trocki, 2006; Bellows, 2009). Yet, the vision of the political *élite* depended on the bureaucracy to be translated into policies, and then implemented as public services impacting upon the citizenry.

Despite its significance, the role played by the Public Service in Singapore's modernization has not been fully explored in literature. Existing literature on the Singapore Public Service concentrates on traditional aspects of the bureaucracy, such as personnel management, anti-corruption, etc., and overlooks the subject of training (Quah, 1996; Quah, 2003; Jones, 2002). There is no dedicated or updated treatment of the subject of training in the Singapore bureaucracy (Sim, 1985; Siow, 1998; Lai, 1995;

Sangiah, 2003). This leads to the question: how did training contribute to the professionalization of the Singapore bureaucracy?

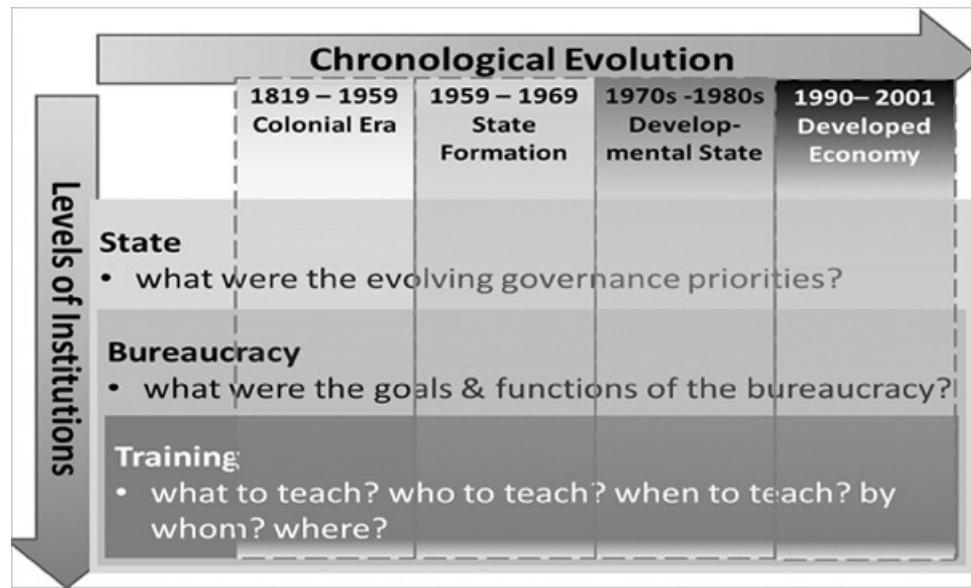
This brief administrative history of training initiatives in the Singapore Public Service draws on archival records and *élite* interviews to address the question.² This study does not dispute the importance of other methodologies but presents administrative history as one approach to expand the field of public administration in Singapore (Raadschelders, 2011, p. 2). Training in this study refers to "the process of developing skills, habits, knowledge and attitudes in the employees for the purpose of increasing the effectiveness of employees in their present government positions, as well as preparing employees for future government positions." (Torpey, 1953, p. 154). The focus on centralized training, where officers from across the Public Service attended common modes of instruction, allows purposeful examination of the subject across the bureaucracy. The study spans from 1959 with Singapore's decolonization to 2001 when the central training school of the bureaucracy was corporatized. The 2001 adjournment also provided a 10-year gap to facilitate access to data informing on the study.

This use of executive development and training, this study asserts, is a means for introducing reforms to professionalize a bureaucracy. The use of training to reform a bureaucracy is neither seen in any other jurisdiction nor featured in public administration literature thus far. Most existing public administration discourse deals with training as a specific topic or routine part of personnel management within the bureaucracy. Two exceptions discussed training in reforms but only as touch-points to topics that were the objectives of the authors (Collins, 1993; Grindle & Hilderbrand, 1995). Fong (1999) did address the use of training to reform the Hong Kong civil service from 1993. But this was 30 years after Singapore started with training-for-reform in 1959 and on a more systematic basis.

Examining the use of training in the professionalization of the Singapore bureaucracy, apart from plugging a gap in current literature, provides lessons for bureaucracies aspiring reforms. Although Singapore's experiences are rooted in its circumstances, some practices could be modified to suit local conditions.

Framework of Analysis

To locate the subject of training in proper perspective, the context of institutional dynamics and evolution of time impacting on training are identified through an analytic framework (Table 1). The three levels of institutional analysis are led by the 'State' providing the over-arching context. It identifies the political *élite* who determined the governance priorities and direction of the bureaucracy. Secondly, the 'Bureaucracy' provides the context within which 'training' is anchored. Finally, a focus on 'Training' is drawn out by the questions of "what, who, when, by whom and where to teach." (Lowe, 2011, p. 314)

Table 1: Institutional & Time Context of Training in the Singapore Bureaucracy

The chronological dimension identified four phases in the development of the Singapore government, beginning with the colonial era (1819 - 1959). The years 1959 to 1969, when Singapore attained self-government and independence, or 'state-formation' conceptualized by Rokkan (Rokkan, 1999, pp. 131-134; Tilly, 1975, p. 65), coincided with the first local training initiative in the Singapore Public Service. The 1970s and 1980s saw Singapore becoming, what Johnson (1982) described as, a 'capitalist developmental state.' Against this background was the advent of a series of training initiatives in the bureaucracy. The 1990s saw Singapore emerging as a developed economy, a period which also witnessed evolutions in the bureaucracy's training institutions culminating in the establishment of the Civil Service College as a statutory board in 2001.

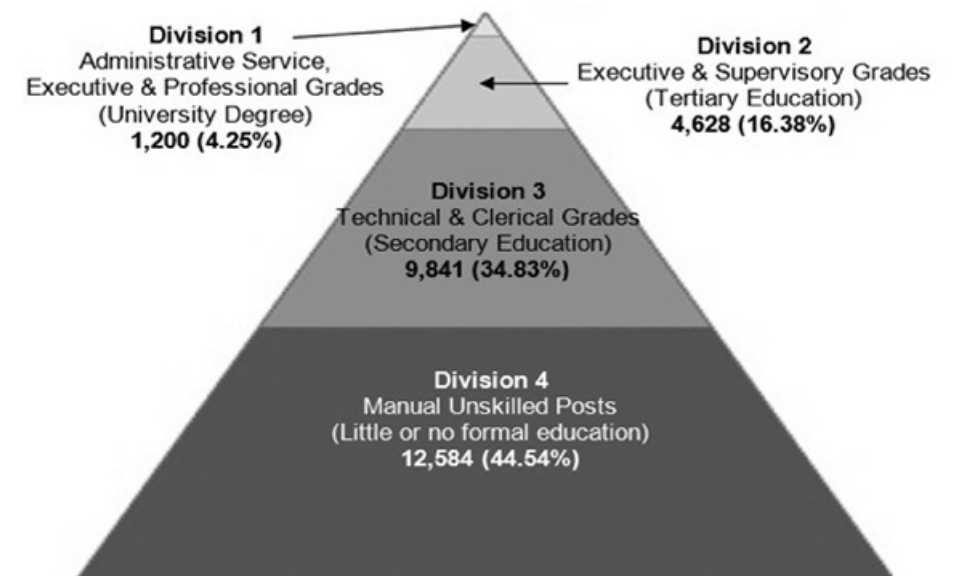
Juxtaposing institutional and chronological contexts, thence, allow for the interrogation of various dynamics influencing the subject of training in each period.

Background

The genesis of the Singapore Public Service, to situate the background for subsequent discussion, lies in the colonial bureaucracy. To keep operating costs low, the British having colonized Singapore in 1819 as a commercial enterprise, the bureaucracy was "the minimum administrative infrastructure necessary for the promotion of economic activities." (Seah, 1971, pp. 4-5). The few civil servants sent out to Singapore had no formal training. An English university education coupled with on-the-job training was thought sufficient to govern the colonies (Blunt, 1937, pp. 35 & 201). For everyday administration, rank-and-file positions such as clerks and policemen were filled by local inhabitants at low salary scales. Even when tertiary education qualified

locals for higher positions over time, their service conditions were kept below those of European colleagues (Seah, 1971, p. 15).

The colonial bureaucracy, long conditioned into a sovereign's agent ruling over imperial subjects, was disconnected with the population. Even local civil servants were overbearing towards the population. Corruption among street-level bureaucrats, sparked off by social-economic dislocation during the Japanese Occupation (1942 - 45) but continuing post-war, worsened public perception of civil servants (Quah, 2010, p. 32). Post-war reforms allowed local officers into executive echelons, including the *élite* Administrative Service heading the Division 1 hierarchy of the bureaucracy (see Table 2). But with a population that was overwhelmingly non-English-speaking, the use of meritocracy in a bureaucracy where English was *lingua franca* perpetuated existing disconnectedness.

Table 2: Personnel Structure of the Singapore Public Service, 1959

Socialization as Training: The Political Study Centre (1959 - 69)

At Singapore's decolonization in 1959, the new locally-elected People's Action Party government, finding a bureaucracy unsuited for nation-building, used training to reform the Public Service. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his ministers were anxious to initiate various development projects and, with Britain still controlling security, secure full independence through merger with Malaya (*Singapore Annual Report (SAR) 1959*, p. 12). Yet, the political masters found a bureaucracy where rank-and-file officers were largely rent-seeking and executives disconnected with the population.³ Civil servants thought the locally-elected PAP government was "pro-communist and ... anti-civil service." (Goh, Oral History, 1993).

Lee Kuan Yew and his government were "exasperated" by their civil servants' lack of "appreciation of the grave challenges before us." (Lee, 1998, p. 319). With the Chinese-speaking majority of the population holding electoral sway, enfranchised by recent decolonization, and the pro-communists eloquent in the Chinese vernacular, the election of a communist regime was highly possible. In the circumstance, Lee and his English-educated ministers had to collaborate with Chinese-educated pro-communist trade unionists to secure the support of the Chinese-speaking electorate. Civil servants, it seemed to Lee and his ministers, had become conditioned to ruling by *fiat* of colonial authority, removed from the need to win the hearts and minds of the local population.

The Political Study Centre and State-Formation

Against this backdrop of terse relationship between the new political masters and the Public Service, the PAP government set up the Political Study Centre (Ministry of Culture, 1959, p. 6). Goh Keng Swee, the Finance Minister whose portfolio included Establishment matters, assessed that civil servants "have not been made aware of the importance of keeping in touch with the masses [because] of past training and background ... in the traditions of the British system." (*Straits Times (ST)*, 29 Jul 1959, p. 14). To reorient the bureaucracy, the Political Study Centre would educate public officers on "the political milieu" in which they would be operating.

The focus of the Political Study Centre was socializing senior officers into an agent of change. Courses were drawn up by PAP ministers; one participant described that classes consisted of:

stimulating lectures, lively Q&A [question and answer], and uninhibited discussions covering the general history of East-West relationship, population changes in Singapore, our economic problems, our problems in nation building, communist tactics both here and in the Federation [of Malaya] with their threats to Malayan nationalism. Theory and practice were equally studied and political institutions were studied against the background of political thought. (Bakti, July 1960, p. 28).

Participants were mostly Administrative Service officers (AOs). This *élite* scheme of service, set up during the colonial era and modeled after the British administrative class, provided the bureaucracy's leadership cadre. These AOs, returning to their posts across various ministries after their stints at the Centre, carried with them that new alignment with the government across the Public Service. The Political Study Centre was thus a catalytic point of change in the Public Service.

No official evaluations of the Political Study Centre are currently available but impressions can be drawn from the recollections of some civil servants. Teo Kah Leong, then-Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of National Development, recalled better understanding of "the background and principles of the communist regimes [and] communism. Many of us in those days were very vague about communism." (Teo,

Oral History, 1993). Most officers acknowledged a clearer appreciation of the political milieu and roles they had to play in the context emerging from stints in the Political Study Centre.

One year on, the Minister for Finance was satisfied that, "senior officers who went through these courses ... understand now why Government policy is what it is." (*Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, 12 Dec 1960, section 388). Civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow thought that the Political Study Centre "changed the mindset: you are no longer the masters, now you are the servants of the people." (Ngiam, Interview, 2013).

The establishment of the Political Study Centre can be better appreciated in the context of, what Rokkan called, 'state-formation' (Rokkan, 1999, pp. 131-134; Tilly, 1975, p. 65). Through this framework, the PAP as the emerging *élite* still insecure politically was 'penetrating' its authority over the bureaucracy. Imposing the Political Study Centre, in the words of civil servant Goh Sin Tub, was telling "the Civil Service: 'This shows you who is boss.' " (Goh, Oral History, 1993).

The PAP Split, Merger into Malaysia, and the Role of the Public Service

Meanwhile, the effects of the bureaucracy's socialization played their parts in the evolving political context. The PAP's defeat at a 1961 by-election alarmed the Malayan government to the risk of Singapore, under a weak PAP government, falling to the communists (Turnbull, 2009, pp. 277-278). To forestall the threat to Malaya's security, the Malayan Prime Minister suggested merger of Singapore with Malaya, allowing the Malayan government to proscribe communists within the PAP. This Lee Kuan Yew and his leaders could not attempt without backlash from the Chinese masses. A referendum on merger was unfolding into a battle for survival between PAP leaders and pro-communists. As pro-communists defected *en masse*, the PAP party organization collapsed.

Against this background, the PAP government drew on the Public Service in its campaign for merger. It highlighted its public service accomplishments to ingratiate itself with the electorate: 44,251 public housing units completed to house 20% of the population, 29 schools constructed to increase school enrolments to 397,005, etc. (Ministry of Culture, 1960a, 1960b, 1962).

The referendum saw an overwhelming 71% support for PAP.

By ensuring Singapore's merger with Malaysia, the Public Service helped save the PAP government from certain political collapse. Behind the statistics cited to lend credence to the PAP government's achievements was the handiwork of public officers. They translated the PAP's political visions into detailed plans and then implemented the programmes to better the lives of the population. The work of the Public Service gave the PAP government the evidence of its public service for the citizens, and converted these into votes for the government at the referendum.

In this regard, the Political Study Centre, by socializing and reforming the Public Service to the task of state-formation, delivered its objectives.

Priority of Socialization and State Formation in Independence

Merger with Malaysia was more remarkable for the tumultuous relations between the Federal government and the Singapore State government; changes to administrative structures were nominal (Lau, 1998; Tan, 2008). The conflict between the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) heading the coalition government in Malaysia, and the PAP in Singapore was fundamentally racial: PAP's meritocratic approach to governance challenged UMNO's affirmative action policies aimed at preserving Malay political dominance. As rhetoric fanned tensions, riots complicated the search for a mutually acceptable solution. To avoid further violence, key UMNO and PAP leaders agreed to separate Singapore from Malaysia to its own independence on 9 Aug 1965.

The suddenness of Singapore's independence surprised its own Public Service, though civil servants were now attuned to its operating context (Lee, 1998, p. 631). Although the Malaysian government separated Singapore from the Federation, radicals in Malaysia threatened to abrogate Singapore's independence (Lee, 2000, p. 22). A state of war remained with Indonesia. "Fortuitously", Chan observed, Singapore's public officers by this time, having undergone "reorientation and retraining [at the Political Study Centre] shared the same ideology as the ruling leadership and was sensitive to its political tasks." (Chan, 1991, p. 162).

Training to Lead Change in a Developmental State (1970s - 1980s)

In 1971, the Staff Training Institute (STI) was set up for the Singapore Public Service to keep pace with the emerging developmental state. The closure of the Political Study Centre in 1969, after the government assessed that most senior civil servants had attended its courses, meant that training had become largely on-the-job; within two years, "more than 50 per cent of the officers are relatively new and *untrained*." (ST, 16 Mar 1971, p. 17).

More importantly, public officers needed the skills to rise up as the 'economic general staff' to manage, what Johnson called, a developmental state (Johnson, 1982, p. 559; Johnson, 1999, p. 40; Wade, 1990, pp. 25-27; Low, 2001, p. 416). The PAP's determination to make Singapore succeed and thrive "created a demand for properly trained civil servants with experience and knowledge of modern management techniques." (Bogaars, 1973, p. 83).

The STI was the government's response to build up an 'economic general staff' within the Administrative Service to keep pace with the developmental state (Staff Training Institute (STI), 1973, Appendix B3; *Management Development (MD)*, Jun 1975, p. 9). Modern facilities saw a name change to the Civil Service Staff Development Institute (CSSDI) but it was a continuation of the existing set-up (*Government Directory (Govt Directory) 1977*, p. 139; *Establishment List 1976*, p. 2).

In 1979, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew called a meeting that reiterated the use of training for reform. Unhappy that the verbose language of memoranda was slowing down "the process of government," the Prime Minister responded to a reference to CSSDI: "Can't we find a better name for CSSDI. Find a word that conveys the meaning instead of an acronym which does not convey any." (MD, Jun 1979, p. 3). Overnight, the Civil Service Staff Development Institute became the Civil Service Institute (CSI) (Vij, Interview, 2013). But its objectives, structure and activities remained the same (*Training Directory*, 1980, p. 1).

To improve communication across the bureaucracy, the CSI was instructed to intensify its language courses. Following the first programme for Administrative Service officers "to learn simple, clear and precise styles of writing" (ST, 12 Jul 1979, p. 8), similar courses were rolled out for officers down the hierarchy.

In retrospect, these efforts to improve language helped professionalize the Public Service. Communication may be taken for granted in the bureaucracies of homogenous societies such as Britain, China or France. But in Singapore, where the mother tongues of the majority of the population are not English, poor communication was apparently inhibiting command and control to require the Prime Minister's personal intervention. Looking back, a senior CSI staff assessed this as "another important accomplishment that is often forgotten, that communication up and down the ranks, if it's clear, concise, crisp... I think that's an important aspect." (Ewing-Chow, Interview, 2011).

Institutionalization of a Tool of Change: Civil Service Institute

Meanwhile, the evolving context saw the CSI becoming the focal point through which change was introduced into the bureaucracy. In response to the 1979 global recession, the PAP government, empowered by a 78% electoral landslide, restructured the economy towards high-value products. To raise labour productivity, a national committee concluded that "the public sector in Singapore should set an example in improving productivity, work attitudes and human management" (SAR 1983, p. 41).

The CSI was tasked to operationalize the productivity movement by starting-up Work Improvement Teams (WITs) to enhance efficiency in daily work (SAR 1986, p. 44). For a quick multiplier effect, CSI would train up WITs leaders who would return to their ministries to train more WITs leaders (ST, 9 Aug 1982, p. 13). By 1989, 76,000 officers or 45% of the Public Service were involved in WITs. This introduction of the productivity movement into the Public Service catalyzed its subsequent propagation into the national economy.

By the 1980s, the CSI had evolved into an established training institution, including for rank-and-file officers. Whether there were any formal evaluation of the CSI's training activities and impact on civil servants cannot be ascertained at this juncture; no records of these were discovered in the course of this research. John Ewing-Chow, Director/CSI (1981 - 85), however, "viewed the whole Public Service as

my boss and CSI and I responded to requests that had national and public service wide impact." (Ewing-Chow, Interview, 2011). This continued under the directorship of David Ma (1986 - 89) and Ms Teo Hee Lian (1989 - 96) (Ma, Interview, 2013; Teo, Interview, 2012).

But the CSI's trajectory of development was pulling it away from the government's longstanding focus on cultivating the Administrative Service *élite*. Although CSI continued to prioritize the training of the AOs, in the eyes of many among its audience, CSI's courses were poor cousins to post-graduate courses at prestigious overseas universities (Tan, Interview, 2013; Sim, 1985, p. 41). The CSI's drive to spearhead productivity across the bureaucracy was regarded by some Public Service leaders as 'miscellaneous' (Ewing-Chow, Interview, 2011). In trying to be the training centre for the whole Public Service, CSI was increasingly seen as a school for the *hoi polloi* and not befitting the AOs.

Training as a Tool for Reforms (1991 - 2001)

A New Political Context: Socialization Revisited

In 1993, a new Civil Service College (CSC) was set up specifically to develop the Administrative Service officers. Kishore Mahbubani, the first Dean of the CSC, explained that, "Civil Service College was always intended for the highest levels of the Service, for the AOs, for the high flyers, to train them, develop them, socialise them." (Mahbubani, Interview, 2012).

Above all, CSC sought to cultivate an ethos among the Public Service leadership. George Yeo, then-Minister of State for Finance, was "most convinced of the need for the CSC" (Yeo, email, 21 Jun 2012) to cultivate within AOs a "collective self-consciousness of its role in society.... concerned with the national welfare and proud to be charged with that responsibility." (Yeo, 1988). Looming large was the political context against which CSC was set up.

The People's Action Party entered into the 1990s after a decade of electoral dips. In 1981 its absolute monopoly of the Parliament ended when it lost a by-election; its share of popular votes fell by 12.6% to 62.9% in the 1984 General Elections, and further to 61.8% in the 1988 polls (SAR 1985, p. 66). The popularity of Goh Chok Tong, who succeeded Lee Kuan Yew as Prime Minister in 1990, appeared able to turn the PAP's electoral tide (Singh, 1992, pp. 32-34; Mutalib, 1992, pp. 71-72). But the 1991 polls saw the PAP in its worst ever electoral outing: the loss of four Parliament-seats and an all-time low of 61% of the vote.

At around this time, Singapore became the subject of a discourse on development's causality relationship towards democratization. Political liberalization in Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs) in the 1980s, from Korea to Taiwan, renewed interest in the thesis that social mobility on the backs of economic development was raising a

more participative middle class (Hewison, Rodan & Robinson, 1993, p. 2). Questions arose on whether similar democratization would emerge in other NICs, including Singapore (Rodan, 1993, p. 52).

The PAP directed some of its post-electoral soul-searching at the bureaucracy. Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong urged civil servants to be "politically astute":

even the most well-meaning policy can end up a disaster if the Government bureaucracy shows no political sensitivity in implementing it.... When the PAP took office in 1959, one of the first things it did was to set up the Political Study Centre.... Perhaps the proposed Civil Service College is a good place for the government to inculcate greater political sensitivity amongst younger civil servants. (Ong, 1992, p. 18).

The reference to the Political Study Centre draws comparison with the political milieu following self-government: new political *élite* consolidating their authority amidst a bureaucracy disconnected with the population. Like their predecessors, the PAP leaders in the 1990s turned to the 'political education' of the Administrative Service leadership, a role envisioned for the Civil Service College.

The Civil Service College drew up a set of programmes to develop the Administrative Service corps at various critical points, or milestones, in the careers of these officers. These milestone programmes were the Foundation Course to induct new AOs, the Senior Management Programme for mid-career heads of departments, and the Leadership in Administration Programme for senior officers rising to the apex of the Public Service hierarchy.

A sampling of feedback from participants suggested that the aim of setting up the CSC, to cultivate a sense of shared ethos among the AO leadership cadre, was largely effective. A young AO, writing after attending the Foundation Course, reflected that she learnt the importance of teamwork and clear communication through the programme (*Ethos*, 1995, No. 1, p. 8). Another account of the Leaders in Administration Programme found in *Ethos*, the journal of the CSC, reported that:

Feedback from the participants showed that once again, experiential learning and sharing of ideas in group discussions are useful learning tools. Although the issues discussed might not be new, the time put aside for deliberation and debate amongst the participants have made this experience a beneficial one for both the participants and CSC. (Ethos, 1995, No. 3, p. 12).

PS21 and Aligning Training for Reforms

In 1995, the launch of the Public Service for the 21st Century (PS21) movement saw training being used as agent of change. PS21, "the most comprehensive administrative reform to be introduced in Singapore," (Quah, 2010, p. 147) coincided with the wave of New Public Management (NPM) ideas in the 1990s. The

corporatization of numerous public service functions, granting high degree of discretionary powers to executives of these autonomous agencies and introduction of market competition and performance indicators to improve efficiency of public services were conceptually similar to NPM.⁴ But Lim Siong Guan, Permanent Secretary (Prime Minister's Office), distinguished PS21 by its quest for 'excellence':

The whole impetus for PS21 has nothing to do with the idea of 'small government'.... [PS21] is this whole concept of 'excellence' - and 'excellence' is being the best that you can be, it's a never ending journey, being the best that you can be - which to me is a different paradigm than just 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness'. (Lim, Interview, 2013).

Training was recognized as a means to improve the quality of public services. Lim explained that, sandwiched between rising demands from the public and pressures from "bosses" to improve the organization of the public service, "The way to develop [the civil servant's] muscles was to build up his competency, build up his skills-level." (Lim, Interview, 2013). A target was set to deliver 12.5 days of training per year for each employee by the year 2000. This '100 hours' target was a five-fold increase in the commitment towards training, until then averaging 2.8 days (*ST*, 28 Feb 1996, p. 23).

Training across the Public Service was reviewed as part of the PS21 reforms. In 1995, Ms Lim Soo Hoon was posted into CSC and appointed as Dean: "Mr. Lim [Siong Guan] said he wanted to consolidate training. He gave me the task of merging the old CSI with the new animal called CSC." (Lim Soo Hoon, Interview, 2012)⁵.

The CSI was soon renamed the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM), the leadership centre became the Institute of Policy Development and both consolidated under a new Civil Service College (*Govt Directory 1996*, pp. 683-695; *Training Directory 1997/98*, p. iii). David Ma returned as Director of IPAM and, significantly, was concurrently Head of the PS21 Office at the Public Service Division: "Mr. Lim [Siong Guan] said, 'Since we needed to make training to support PS21', I was put in.... The whole idea was to support PS21." (Ma, Interview, 2013).

Among IPAM's adjustments to support PS21 was a Training Framework that mirrored the PS21 Training Initiative. Each of the five career stages consisted of "five groups of generic competence: Managing service excellence, Managing change, Managing/working with people, Managing operations and resources, Managing self." (*Training Directory, 1997 - 1998*, p. iv).

Within a year IPAM increased its course-offerings by 17% to 177 courses, training 20,000 officers or one-third of all civil servants (*Training Programme 1996/97; Training Directory, 1997 - 1998*, p. i; *Budget for the Financial Year 1998/99 (Budget 1998/99)*, p. 64). By 1999, it ran 458 courses to train 92,000 officers, technically reaching out to all 67,795 civil servants, with some returning as repeated customers (*Training Directory, 2000*, p. ii; *Budget FY2000-2001*, p. 65). Training Officer, Ms

Ngiam Su Wei, remembered "introducing many different training programmes [to meet the PS21 target of] 100 training hours." (Ngiam Su Wei, Interview, 2013) PS21 reforms was the *raison d'être* for the rapid expansion in IPAM's capacity to provide training across the Public Service.

Injecting Competition

To maintain the quality of IPAM's programmes amidst the quantitative growth, David Ma placed IPAM on Inter-Departmental Charging (IDC) model (Ma, Interview, 2013). This transferred the government's training budget, until then allocated by the Ministry of Finance to IPAM, to the ministries. Should ministries not subscribe to IPAM's programmes, IPAM could become obsolescent.

The timing couldn't be worst: currency crises across Southeast Asia dampened the 1997 economic outlook. Measures by the PAP government, empowered by 64% popular vote at elections that year, allowed Singapore 7.8% economic growth (Daniel, 1998, pp. 2-6).

For IPAM, government agencies' subscription to its programmes did not dip. On reflection, IPAM officer Ms Ngiam Su Wei thought: "IDC was one way to ensure that we offer quality training programmes to the Public Service." (Ngiam Su Wei, Interview, 2013).

In 1998, Permanent Secretary Lim Siong Guan assigned Yam Ah Mee, his new Deputy Secretary and concurrently Dean/Civil Service College, the task of scaling up competition across CSC. David Ma observed that, "with Inter Departmental Charging, we were still a government department. ... we would still go back to our bosses and say, 'We have no money, help us.' " (Ma, Interview, 2013). Cutting CSC adrift from the Public Service Division's funding to compel high quality relevant training for the bureaucracy, in contrast, would remove any last resort to the Civil Service for help. CSC would have to finance itself from the courses it would sell. But CSC would have flexibility to recruit staff at competitive market conditions without the strictures of civil service regulations.

As a self-financing statutory board, Yam Ah Mee needed to raise a \$10.8 million initial operating capital. But the economic outlook was complicating his pitch to bankers: the 2001 GDP was contracting 2.2% following the 9/11 attacks on the United States (Baharudin, 2002, p. 2). Yam "had to show the bank This is the strategy. I had to give them a value proposition. So the bank supported us, I signed this." (Yam, Interview, 2011). The decision weighed heavily on him: "This was the first time I borrowed \$10.8 million and I knew that in 6½ months, about seven months, it would run dry, unless we did well. I really didn't sleep well."

CSC as a Statutory Board

On 1 Oct 2001, CSC formally became a self-financing statutory board under the

purview of the Public Service Division in the Prime Minister's Office (ST, 10 Oct 2001, p. H10). The Institute of Policy Development remained focused on the development of the Administrative Service and leadership corps of the Public Service; IPAM continued to cover public administration and PS21 initiatives.

The quest for financial viability led Yam Ah Mee, as Dean/CEO, to recruit private sector expertise to instill competition and fiscal discipline (Yam, Interview, 2011). A tight feedback loop allowed him to evaluate and make quick decisions on the fly.

Operating at such high intensity was exacting. Ngiam Su Wei, by now an IPAM manager, remembered a number of staff left because "it no longer resonated with them." (Ngiam Su Wei, Interview, 2013). Yam received "many nasty letters [some going to] Mr. Lim Siong Guan [Head of Civil Service], went to Mr. Eddie Teo [Permanent Secretary, PSD], went even beyond that." (Yam, Interview, 2011). Fortunately for Yam, the leadership was prepared to hear him out: "I had to explain to Mr. Lim Siong Guan, Eddie Teo, many people: we were doing the right thing, it's moving well." Yam and CSC were allowed to continue.

Taking Stock

Evaluating public sector organizations is difficult - the complexity involved in quantifying public service meant that what cannot be measured cannot be evaluated. Perhaps one approach is to assess CSC against the objective it set for itself.

When CSC transitioned into a statutory board, it aimed to provide high quality training relevant to the Public Service. In that regard, the financial results validated the relevance to the bureaucracy, as Yam Ah Mee recalled:

the total revenue brought in was \$43 million [Financial Year 2002]. In fact, for the three years, it was about \$43 million [FY2002], \$39 million [FY2003], \$43 million [FY2004]. Beyond expectations.

The reason was that while we reached to the usual ministries, although they did lesser, we did more, we did local and overseas. And then I found that subsequent second year, they all came back. Because after they tried outside, then they said that outside not so customized, may not be so good. And the first year we had a net surplus of a couple of millions. (Yam, Interview, 2013).

Yam's greatest relief was that, "within the first year I returned to DBS [Bank] \$10.8 million." With remuneration pegged to financial outcomes, CSC staff were also "rewarded for all the hardwork." (Ngiam Su Wei, Interview, 2013).

One dimension worth evaluating is the 'cost' upon its staff. Officers were fatigued by the ramping up of programmes and preoccupation with targets, but this might be inevitable in order to 'unlock' the full potential of the organization, as one departmental head mused:

if you look at it from another point of view, you might wonder how much spare capacity we had been harbouring in the old set-up.... The moment you turned it the other way around and say, 'I'm going to pay you based on performance, I'm going to pay you based on whether you meet your KPIs, the more you earn, the more bonus you get.' Straight away, human behavior changes and you can unleash, almost doubling. It's quite a good illustration of how market forces can unleash all these sleepy government performance. (Roger Tan, Interview, 2013).

Several managers with longer stints concurred. M. Logendran pointed out that, "Survival was the word! sometimes you have to do some things which were not pleasant at the time, but it was the right thing to do." (Logendran, Interview, 2013). All other CSC officers interviewed for this study felt that the focus on survivability at that time was necessary, despite the strain on staff, and laid the foundation for today's Civil Service College (Ngiam Su Wei, Interview, 2013; Tina Tan, Interview, 2013; Wong, Interview, 2013).

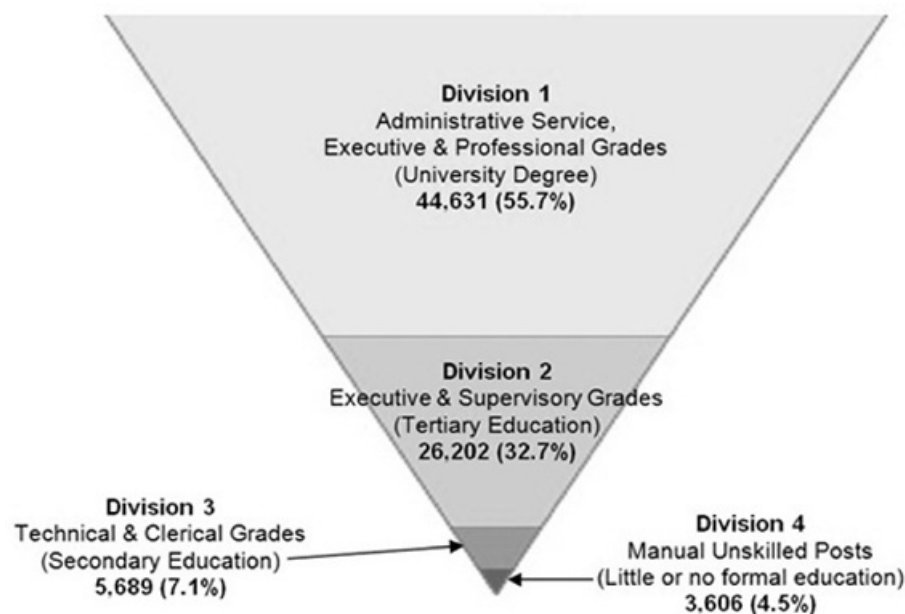
In retrospect, the advent of New Public Management re-shaped learning and executive development in the Singapore Public Service in the 1990s. Mandating each civil servant to undergo a specific 100-hours of annual training, injecting mechanisms such as Inter-Departmental Charging and finally turning the Civil Service College into a self-financing statutory board were NPM in action: performance indicators, market-based competition and corporatization. New Public Management ideas transformed the approach towards training and development in the Singapore Public Service in the 1990s.

Conclusion

The objective of this study, as set out at the beginning of this paper, is to present the use of training and executive development by the Singapore Public Service to introduce reforms to keep it relevant. The analytic framework anchors the study in the institutional context of the state and bureaucracy, as it traverses through the periods in Singapore's development. At self-government, the new locally-elected political leadership at the state-level, contemplating an ineffectual Public Service inherited from the colonial era at the bureaucracy-level, imposed the Political Study Centre - in the guise of training - to reorient civil servants towards the task of state-formation. In the 1970s and 1980s, the setting up of the Staff Training Institute and Civil Service Institute could be traced to the need to inject changes into the bureaucracy, in order to meet the needs of the Singapore developmental state. Finally, the PS21 initiative harnessed executive development and training as a catalyst to introduce reforms across the Singapore bureaucracy, keeping the Public Service relevant to the Singapore state. Throughout this period of over 40 years, executive development and training have been the means through which reforms were introduced into the Singapore Public Service.

The defining features of the Singapore model underscore the contribution of executive development and training upon the Singapore bureaucracy. Key among these was the importance of strong political support to finance the bureaucracy's training and reforms agenda. Secondly, an economy-first imperative generated the resources to fund the bureaucracy's programmes. The fruits of prioritizing economic development, while taking some time to materialize, provided the wherewithal for the bureaucracy to develop, grow its training initiatives and pursue reforms. At the same time, social development financed from an economy-first imperative also availed higher capacity human capital to staff the Public Service. This allows the Public Service to concentrate on high-level policy design and formulation, skill up rank-and-file vocations thereby providing them with career mobility, and reduce the number of unskilled positions in the bureaucracy. The personnel structure of today's Public Service is a reverse of the pyramidal small elite presiding over a large rank-and-file base inherited from the colonial bureaucracy (see Table 3).

Table 3: Personnel Structure of the Singapore Public Service, 2013



This study is not prescribing a template for replication in other jurisdictions, but offers some features for reference. Singapore's context in the use of training to reform its Public Service is exceptional - small physical size aiding governance, one-party rule providing political continuity, etc. But aspects in this approach can be decontextualized.

Consistently strong political support is necessary for any initiative to take off in the bureaucracy. Yet, training and reforms improve the bureaucracy's capacity to deliver public services which, in ingratiating the government of the day with the electorate, can be persuasive arguments to garner support from political masters.

A strong fiscal position, arising from steady economic growth over the years, provided the fiscal wherewithal to drive and sustain the training-for-reforms initiative in the Singapore Public Service. The reality, hence, is the necessity of an economy-first imperative to accrue sufficient resources to finance developmental projects.

Raising standards of living often stands out as obvious priorities, but improving the bureaucracy has the consequential advantage of injecting efficiency in social reforms. Social development, by enhancing healthcare and education, does contribute towards reforming the civil service since its personnel are drawn from the population. But, focusing solely on social development and neglecting the bureaucracy risks undoing any progress in development. The key is drawing up a fine balance between investing in social development, and executive training to reform the bureaucracy.

This study is designed as a touchstone for further research. The 10-year distance from the scope of study, having worked well indeed to desensitize the sources and ease access to information, immediately presented areas for follow-up study. The Civil Service College underwent numerous changes since 2001, including several leadership successions. More significantly, changes in the operating milieu of the Public Service after the 2011 general election required the CSC to adjust itself in relation to the bureaucracy. Even as heightened citizen expectation and the social media constrict the time and space for policy responses to increasingly complex issues - such as ageing population, healthcare financing, remaining economically competitive, trans-national terrorism, just to name a few - the government is compelled to set aside attention to engage with the citizenry. How the Civil Service College will respond to the changes expected from the Public Service in this newly emerging operating milieu should be the focus of a serious update to this administrative history or even a dedicated study.

Laid against the broader field of the academic discipline, this study poses some questions for further reflection and research on the role of training and executive development in public administration. By contextualizing the evolution of the Singapore Public Service against the country's development, can Singapore's transformation be completely dependent upon the political leadership? By tracing the impact of training institutions upon the bureaucracy, does training not have a broader scope in public administration beyond the current bounds of personnel management? Can training be designed with a more significant role in nation-building strategies for developing countries? There is indeed much scope for future research to follow on from this study.

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Notes

1. This article is an adaptation of the author's PhD thesis, which is a detailed administrative history of training and executive development in reforming the Singapore Public Service.
2. The term "Public Service" encompasses statutory boards structured outside of ministries which made up the civil service (*Constitution*, 1980, Article 102).
3. Policemen were accepting \$10 to overlook traffic offences; a driver's licence could be guaranteed for \$100 (Yap, Lim & Leong, 2010, p. 175; Cheong, 2012, p. 296).
4. Haque found that 102 government departments and units had been converted into autonomous agencies by 1997. Haque, 2009, p. 255.
5. Lim Soo Hoon is not related to Lim Siong Guan.

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