‘Sense of dare’ vital to S’pore’s education system

SINGAPORE – Despite its students scoring highly in mathematics, science and reading in a prestigious international benchmarking test, Singapore’s education system must keep experimenting and have a “sense of dare” to prepare for the future, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday.

“The biggest mistake we would make is to think that because we’re doing well in the Pisa test ... therefore we keep things as they are. The biggest mistake is to think, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” he told the audience at Nanyang Technological University’s inaugural Majulah lecture.

The Pisa — Programme for International Student Assessment — is a triennial study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. It compares how education systems are helping students acquire knowledge and skills to solve real-world problems.

Mr Tharman was speaking to about 1,500 university students, academics and guests on “How education shifts will make our future”. Education policymakers will know how well measures have worked only 20 to 30 years later, but “by changing and experimenting, by having a sense of dare, we are best preparing ourselves for a range of eventualities in the future”.

The education and training industry has not been particularly responsive to learning outcomes and it has to evolve, said Mr Tharman.

“There has been very little modification based on feedback from outcomes. And that is the new game in education: Constant feedback loops based on actual outcomes which we have to measure, capture and keep modifying — teaching methods, curriculum and so on,” he added.

Improvements taking place include doing more to help children at an early stage, more fluid and flexible pathways for students, lifelong learning and deepening of multiculturalism.

In the last area, Mr Tharman felt some co-curricular activities are “far too ethnically defined”. Football is dominated by Malays, and sports like table tennis, volleyball and basketball appear to be “Chinese” games, although some schools like Dunman and Jurong Secondary have been deliberate in forming multiracial basketball teams, he noted. “We are trapping ourselves too easily, and it is not difficult to change,” he said.

Pathways for students should be “porous” with “no dead ends” so that they can capitalise on various strengths.

At its Committee of Supply debate this year, the Education Ministry announced that all secondary schools offering Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) courses would allow students to take subjects at a higher level from Secondary 1 from next year, for example.

The SkillsFuture movement, meanwhile, promotes lifelong learning and Mr Tharman said employers should train workers for the present and future, with help from the Government.

Concluding on an optimistic note, he said: “We can do this ... It means a new spirit in education. When you think of our (national) anthem, remember ‘Mari-lah kita bersatu, dengan semangat yang baru’ (with a new spirit). And that new spirit was not intended just for the day we became a new nation 52 years ago.”