

# 14 singapore

CHARITY 'REGRETFUL' THAT HANDBOOK HAS OFFENDED STUDENTS

## Sexuality workshop carries no religious content: Vendor

*Increasing research to support programme's material, says Focus on the Family's CEO*

SIAU MING EN  
siaumingen@mediacorp.com.sg

**SINGAPORE** – The vendor of a controversial workshop on managing relationships, which it conducted at Hwa Chong Institution (HCI), yesterday defended the content of its programme, saying it was based on well-researched materials by trusted family life and relationship experts.

In a statement posted on the website of Focus on the Family Singapore, a Christian charity, CEO Joanna Koh-Hoe stressed that the workshop in question, It's UNcomplicated, had been developed to ensure it "carries no religious content", given its use in schools. "As with other communi-

ty programmes conducted by faith-based organisations, there is also no attempt to proselytise or share the faith and beliefs," she said.

Ms Koh-Hoe added that the programme was based on materials from experts such as author Gary Chapman, who is known for his concept of the Love Languages, as well as social researchers Jeff Feldhahn and his wife Shaunti, whose work is internationally recognised.

There is increasing research that supports the workshop's content, said Ms Koh-Hoe, noting that neurological studies, for instance, had shown how male-female brain differences might contribute to generalised differences in behaviour between the genders.

Earlier this week, HCI student Agatha Tan shared a letter she had written to her principal on her Facebook page, saying the programme "seemed to emphasise and enforce traditional gender roles in a relationship".

Referring to a booklet that was given to students, she took issue with lines such as what a girl wears matters "lest she becomes an 'eye magnet' that cannot be avoided".

In a letter to students and teachers on Thursday, HCI principal Hon Chiew Weng said the school had found that the facilitators of the workshop were ineffective in addressing participants' concerns and plans to design its own workshops in future.

Ms Koh-Hoe said Focus on the Family Singapore is "regretful" that the handbook had offended a group of HCI students and caused such "strong reactions from a JC female student".

"There is definitely always room for improvement and necessary updates," she added.

Ms Koh-Hoe noted that more than 14,000 students from 13 schools had attended the workshop since its launch last year.

More than 1,000 HCI students

attended 10 workshops conducted last week, she said, with 73 per cent of them rating the workshop as "Very Good/Good" and 87.7 per cent giving the facilitators the same grade.

Ms Feldhahn shared an open letter, dated Wednesday, to leaders of Focus on the Family Singapore on her website. She noted that as the Feldhahns' research had been extensive and scientifically rigorous, it provided a good foundation for a strong education in key elements that young people and married couples most need to know.

However, Ms Feldhahn — who, along with her husband, was invited to Singapore in 2009 by the then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports to share their research — added that there had been some who "misunderstand or misread the research". Citing the example of how the wiring of the male brain makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a man to avoid noticing a woman who is dressed provocatively, she noted that each man also has a choice of how to handle such a reaction.

"We strongly disagree with the idea that teaching the brain wiring and mutual respect is somehow contributing to a 'rape culture'. That is a clear misunderstanding and it confuses the real and important issue. Teaching that will help both men and women," she said.

“As with other community programmes conducted by faith-based organisations, there is also no attempt to proselytise or share the faith and beliefs.”

Ms Joanna Koh-Hoe  
CEO OF FOCUS ON THE FAMILY SINGAPORE

## Govt trying out various platforms to reach out: Chuan-Jin

JOY FANG  
joyfangz@mediacorp.com.sg

**SINGAPORE** – While the Government's approach is to simplify information and provide as much information as possible to the people, several challenges stand in its way of getting its messages across, said Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin.

People do not read all the materials available and different segments of the populace may have contending views on the extent of details they want, he said, citing how there are some who want more details instead of information that is dumbed down.

"The challenge today is that with the Internet, there is a lot more information, but it also means it's very difficult to figure out what you want to read. In fact, one could argue that a lot of people are also not reading a lot of the materials that are put up," said Mr Tan, who was speaking at Singapore Management University's Career and Internship Fair yesterday. "The problem today is that you have a lot of contending spaces for your time and attention."

Despite these challenges, Mr Tan acknowledged that the Government could do better in its outreach efforts and said it was trying out different



Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin speaking to student leaders at SMU Career and Internship Fair yesterday.  
PHOTO: OOI BOON KEONG

platforms and formats as different people relate to information in different ways. However, developing these materials for different the platforms and formats takes time, he noted.

"I don't think we expect every single one of us to understand every single thing completely but, at the very least, the material needs to be out there (and) the communication channels need to be open," he added.

The evolution and expansion of me-

diums for exchange pose another challenge, he said. While channels such as Facebook and other platforms have made it easier for discourse to develop, Mr Tan said government leaders were still learning to deal with the situation, including trying to figure out how to carve out constructive spaces where people can debate and discuss "civilly and constructively".

Mr Tan made these remarks in a speech entitled Perspectives On Lead-

ership, which was attended by 180 students. He also outlined what he felt marked a good leader, including the ability to gain people's trust, having the ability to engage, being capable of providing clarity and setting a nurturing climate.

During a dialogue segment, a student asked him to what extent academic excellence was better than possessing good leadership qualities. In response, Mr Tan said the two need not be mutually exclusive choices. Students can do their best in school and, at the same time, develop who they are and the abilities they are good at. "There is no reason that as you're trying your best to do well in school, you should neglect your own development as an individual," he said.

Grades are necessary as they provide employers a certain gauge of one's level of competency, he said. "It's not a proxy for everything, but at least you've got a certain baseline... Of course, pursuit of that at the expense of everything else is a different thing altogether. So, let's not get away with the idea that it's not important to do as best as you can," he said. At the end of the day, grades are "just a marker at that certain stage of your life, before other things are clearly discernible", he added.