the
Singapore
WAY

STUDENT
GUIDE

Fostering Innovation and Entrepreneurship

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Chapter 13: Fostering Innovation and Entrepreneurship

1. Welcome & Purpose of This Case

Welcome to a Case About Building Boldness—Systematically

You've probably heard that great startups begin in garages, coffee shops, or chaotic markets. But what if innovation could be **designed by policy, culture, and infrastructure**?

This case explores how **Singapore—a country known for control and caution—built one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic startup ecosystems.**

From R&D hubs to venture funds, from talent pipelines to cultural mind shifts, you'll learn how a highly structured society made space for creativity, experimentation, and failure—without losing its edge in stability.

Why This Case Matters to You

Whether you're an aspiring founder, a creative thinker, a policy student, or a sceptical observer of "startup hype," this case helps you understand:

- **What it really takes to support entrepreneurship at scale**
- How **governments, universities, investors, and communities** all shape innovation
- How your own culture **supports or suppresses bold ideas**
- The difference between **inspiration and infrastructure**

You'll get to ask:

"What's stopping the next great idea where I live—and how can we fix it?"

You'll Explore:

- Singapore's shift from trade to tech and from hawkers to high-growth ventures
- The systems (like Startup SG, Block71, A*STAR) that help innovation scale
- How culture, risk, and failure shape founder behavior
- What makes an ecosystem work—and what can break it

Thought to Begin With

"Startups don't succeed because of genius.
They succeed because someone built the system that let them try, fail, and try again."

This case is about that system—and how you might build one of your own.

2. Case Background

🇸🇬 Singapore's Innovation Leap: From Efficiency to Experimentation

For decades, Singapore's economy thrived on:

- Trade and logistics
- Industrial parks
- Global finance
- Rule of law and predictability

But by the early 2000s, leaders realized something critical:
The future economy wouldn't be built on efficiency alone—it needed ideas.

So, Singapore began investing in innovation—not just in **products**, but in the **systems that support entrepreneurs**:

- Research & Development (A*STAR)
- Startup clusters (Block71)
- Talent and grants (Startup SG)
- Global partnerships and sandboxes (SGInnovate, EDBI)

What Makes the Singapore Approach Unique

Instead of waiting for creativity to emerge, Singapore did something rare:
It **designed for it.**
That meant:

- Government seed funding + access to mentorship
- A strong IP regime to protect innovation
- Deep connections between universities, investors, and founders
- Public tolerance (and even celebration) of calculated risk

This balance of **discipline and boldness** helped Singapore build **over 2,000 startups, attract unicorns**, and become a regional hub for deep tech and global expansion.

Key Ecosystem Elements

System	Singapore's Solution
Early-stage capital	Startup SG Founder Grant, angel networks, VC incentives
Research & innovation	A*STAR institutes + university spinouts
Talent pipelines	Scholarships, STEM focus, foreign talent pathways
Startup spaces	Block71, JTC LaunchPads, co-working hubs
Globalization	Smart visa pathways, cross-border expansion support

Tensions and Trade-offs

Even with its success, Singapore still wrestles with big questions:

- Can innovation thrive in a structured society?
- How do you build a culture of risk in a place that values perfection?
- What role should the government play in a space meant for disruption?

This case isn't about Silicon Valley.
It's about a **homegrown model** where the state, founders, and society worked together to **make entrepreneurship possible, visible, and scalable**.

3. Learning Objectives

This case helps you see entrepreneurship not as a buzzword, but as a **system of trust, tools, talent, and tolerance**—one that can be built or broken by design.

By the end of this case, you'll be able to:

Understand:

- How Singapore built a **national innovation ecosystem from scratch**
- The role of government in **seeding, scaling, and supporting startups**
- The importance of **infrastructure, talent, and failure culture** in entrepreneurship
- How systems and mindsets interact to shape boldness, risk-taking, and creativity

Analyse:

- The difference between **founder myth vs. ecosystem reality**
- Which elements (funding, education, policy, culture) are most critical in your context
- How Singapore's strategy **compares to other startup hubs**
- What trade-offs exist between control, freedom, and innovation

Apply:

- Audit your country's or city's startup ecosystem
- Propose a realistic policy or cultural shift that would spark more entrepreneurship
- Reflect on your own identity as a builder, innovator, or founder
- Create a team pitch, narrative, or policy brief for a startup or system reform

You'll Be Ready to Discuss:

- Can entrepreneurship be engineered—or must it emerge organically?
- Should governments act like VCs?
- How do you balance creativity with public accountability?
- What would it take for *your* country to become a founder-friendly place?

This case helps you move from **startup admiration to startup architecture**—so you can be part of shaping the next big thing.

4. Pre-Class Preparation

This session works best when you arrive ready to think like a **founder, policymaker, and ecosystem builder**. Whether you love startups or question them, this case will show you how innovation is built from the ground up—and who gets to shape it.

Required Reading

- **Chapter 13 of *The Singapore Way***
  Focus on:
    o How Singapore built innovation platforms like A*STAR, Startup SG, and Block71
    o The mindset shift from perfection to experimentation
    o How different actors (government, investors, founders, universities) coordinate
    o Tensions between public support and private agility

Optional Short Videos (Highly Recommended)

Title	Why It's Useful
Singapore's Startup Scene Explained – CNA	Overview of government programs, spaces, and investor partnerships
Inside Block71: A Startup Story	Tells how a warehouse became a symbol of innovation
Can Governments Create Innovation? – TEDx or Davos	Global context on public sector innovation strategies
SGInnovate: The Deep Tech Advantage	Shows how Singapore supports science-based entrepreneurship

Reflection Prompts (Think or Write Brief Notes)

Pick 2–3 to explore before class:

1. What's one bold idea you've had—but haven't pursued? Why?
2. Do you think failure is accepted in your culture or country? How is it treated?
3. What role should governments play in helping startups?
4. What would help you (or someone you know) become a founder?
5. Do people in your country associate entrepreneurship with risk, pride, or survival?

Optional Task: Local Innovation Snapshot

Research and bring 2 data points about your country's startup or innovation scene:

Element	Your Answer
Top innovation sector	
Most well-known startup hub or campus	
Biggest policy or funding gap	
One recent success story or local failure	

Come to class ready to share what's working—and what isn't—where you live.

You don't have to be a founder to think like one.
You just need to ask:

"What would it take to make innovation possible where I'm from?"

5. In-Class Participation

This session puts you inside the **real challenges of designing, funding, and sustaining innovation**—not just talking about startups, but building the systems behind them.

You'll work in groups, simulate roles, and pitch ideas grounded in Singapore's model, adapted to your context.

What to Expect

Activity	Purpose
Case Discussion	Understand Singapore's approach: systems, culture, policy, mindset
Ecosystem Mapping	Compare your local startup scene to Singapore's model
"Pitch or Pass" Simulation	Practice evaluating or defending startup ideas based on feasibility, funding, and public value
Innovation Lab Design Sprint	Build a national or local ecosystem to support bold founders
Reflection Dialogue	Explore how your personal story connects to innovation and risk

How to Participate Effectively

- Use insights from the Singapore case—Startup SG, A*STAR, Block71, etc.
- Be ready to **design and defend**: What does your ecosystem need, and why?
- Connect local experience with global models
- Take creative risks, but also think like a **systems designer**
- Reflect on what innovation means—not just economically, but culturally

Sample Discussion Questions

- Can entrepreneurship be supported without being controlled?
- How does your country treat failure—and what could change that?
- What would your own **"Startup SG" or "Block71"** look like?
- What role should schools, investors, or the state play in nurturing ideas?

What Participation May Be Assessed On

	Criteria
	Engaging with case material during discussion and activities
	Applying insights from Singapore's model to your own context
	Contributing to group tasks with creativity and realism
	Asking thoughtful questions or sharing bold ideas
	Reflecting on innovation through both system and personal lenses

This session helps you see that startups don't grow in isolation—they thrive when **someone builds the soil, not just the seeds**.

6. Assignments

These assignments invite you to become more than a student of startups—you'll become a **systems thinker, ecosystem designer, or bold storyteller**, applying the case's lessons to your country, campus, or career path.

Choose what best fits your goals and course:

Option 1: Essay – "What Makes Innovation Work Here?"

Length: 1,200–1,500 words
Prompt:
Audit your country or city's startup ecosystem. What's missing? What's working? What's a **realistic, bold shift** that could unlock innovation?

Include:

- Brief context and cultural backdrop
- Analysis of 2–3 ecosystem gaps or strengths
- Policy or infrastructure proposal (inspired by Singapore's model)
- Barriers to change and how to overcome them

Option 2: Innovation Policy Pitch (Visual)

Format: Slide deck (5–7 slides), 1-page proposal, or infographic
Prompt:
Propose a **public or campus-level policy** that supports entrepreneurship. Draw on Singapore's approach to structure, funding, or cultural change.

Include:

- Problem it solves
- Key ecosystem features (e.g., funding, space, skills, mindset)
- Your "Startup SG" or "Block71" equivalent
- Who benefits—and who might resist it

Optional: Add a name, tagline, or campaign slogan.

Option 3: Design a Startup (Team or Solo)

Format: Executive summary + 3-min pitch (live or recorded)
Prompt:
Build a fictional or real startup idea that could launch in Singapore—or borrow Singapore's model to launch in your own country.

Include:

- Sector and problem
- Founding story and team
- Needed supports (grants, mentors, policy shifts)
- A Singapore system you would replicate

Option 4: Founder's Diary – A Creative Reflection

Format: Essay (500–800 words), podcast, voice memo, or video log
Prompt:
Imagine you're launching a startup in your country—or Singapore. Reflect on:

- What you're building and why
- What excites you and what scares you
- What your country would need to help you succeed
- What failure might look like—and why you'd try anyway

Bonus Prompt: End with "Dear future me, here's what I hope we've built…"

These assignments are your chance to show how **entrepreneurship is about systems and people—not just pitches and profit.**

7. Reflective Practice

Entrepreneurship isn't just about business models—it's about **identity, courage, risk, and resilience.** This section helps you connect the Singapore case to your own beliefs, fears, and hopes about building something new.

Personal Reflection Prompts

Choose 2–3 to explore through writing, voice notes, drawing, or dialogue:

1. **"A time I had an idea—but didn't act on it..."**
   What held you back? What support would have helped?

2. **"In my culture, failure is seen as..."**
   Is it shameful? Acceptable? Celebrated?
   How would that affect someone trying to innovate?

3. **"I think innovation should be _____, but my country treats it like _____."**
   What's the gap between values and reality?

4. **"If I built something bold, I'd want my government or school to..."**
   Fund me? Mentor me? Leave me alone? Celebrate me? Protect me?

5. **"To me, being a founder means..."**
   Is it about freedom, impact, risk, rebellion, legacy, wealth, or something else?

Mini Self-Assessment: Startup Readiness Compass

Rate each from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree):

Statement	Score
I understand how policy, funding, and infrastructure shape startups	
I believe I could launch an idea if the right supports existed	

Statement	Score
I know what kind of founder, team member, or innovator I want to be	
I feel encouraged—not judged—when I try something new	
I can imagine a future where my country is a hub for innovation	

Reflection:
What score do you wish was higher?
What's the one system or mindset shift that would help?

Final Thought

"Startups don't just need vision.
They need soil, sunlight, and someone to believe they can grow."

You're not just studying innovation.
You're preparing to help build it—wherever you go.

8. Glossary of Key Terms

These terms will help you **speak the language of innovation**, understand Singapore's startup system, and communicate your ideas clearly.

Term	Definition
Startup SG	A national initiative offering grants, mentoring, and access to capital and markets for early-stage startups in Singapore.
Block71	An iconic Singapore startup hub that began in an industrial building and now houses dozens of tech companies, accelerators, and VCs.
A*STAR	Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research; a key body funding and translating R&D into commercial ventures.
SGInnovate	A government-backed platform that supports deep tech startups, connects researchers to entrepreneurs, and co-invests in frontier innovation.
Innovation Ecosystem	The full set of actors (founders, funders, mentors, universities, governments) and systems (IP laws, infrastructure, talent) that support entrepreneurship.
Deep Tech	Startups based on advanced science or engineering (e.g., AI, medtech, robotics) that require longer development but can have high impact.
Angel Investor	An individual who invests their own money into early-stage startups, often in exchange for equity or future returns.
Risk Culture	The set of social, educational, and financial attitudes toward failure, uncertainty, and experimentation in a given place.
Founder's Dilemma	The challenge of balancing personal identity, control, funding, and growth as a startup scales or pivots.
Startup Stack	The layers of support (e.g., grants, accelerators, R&D, infrastructure, education) that collectively enable startup success.

Pro Tip: Use at least 3–5 of these terms in your essay, pitch, or discussion to demonstrate a clear and contextual understanding of innovation ecosystems.

9. Additional Resources

These books, videos, websites, and case studies will help you dive deeper into how **innovation ecosystems work**—and how Singapore turned policy into possibility.

Readings & Reports

Title	Source	Why It's Useful
Startup SG Founder Guide	Enterprise Singapore	Details how funding, mentorship, and government support work for new founders
Singapore Deep Tech Ecosystem Overview	SGInnovate	Shows how science, talent, and venture support intersect
Global Startup Ecosystem Report	Startup Genome	Ranks Singapore alongside other leading innovation hubs
Entrepreneurship in Asia	Harvard Business Review	Regional patterns of startup culture, government policy, and VC funding
Designing Ecosystems	Stanford d.school	Creative frameworks for building collaborative systems that spark innovation

Videos & Documentaries

Title	Platform	Focus
Inside Block71: Where Singapore's Startups Grow	YouTube	Behind-the-scenes look at a government-backed startup space
SGInnovate: From Research to Startup	Gov.sg / SGInnovate	How Singapore helps scientists become founders
CNA Startup Spotlight Series	CNA Insider	Features diverse founders building in fintech, medtech, AI, and more
The Role of Government in Startups	World Economic Forum	Global debate on state-driven innovation
Unicorns in Asia: Case Studies	Bloomberg or Channel News Asia	Rise of Southeast Asian startups from idea to IPO

Online Tools & Platforms

- https://startupsg.gov.sg – Portal for grants, incubators, and ecosystem resources
- https://sginnovate.com – Deep tech builder and investor
- https://edbi.com – Singapore's strategic investment arm for innovation
- https://startupsgenome.com – Global benchmarking and startup ecosystem data
- https://asiastartupnetwork.org – Regional best practices and founder forums

Other Countries to Compare

Place	Why It's Interesting
Estonia	Digitally native nation with fast incorporation and e-citizenship for founders
Israel (Tel Aviv)	Strong R&D-to-startup pipeline with global VC support
Chile (Startup Chile)	Government-run accelerator offering equity-free funding to attract global talent
India (Bangalore)	Massive scale, engineering depth, and frugal innovation culture
Rwanda (Kigali)	Government-supported innovation zone focused on tech for development

These resources help you **connect the Singapore story to your own innovation journey—and to global models of how nations empower entrepreneurs.**

10. FAQs & Support

This section answers common questions you might have as you **reflect, create, or prepare your assignments** based on Singapore's innovation strategy.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1: What if I don't want to be a founder—is this case still for me?

A: Yes! This case is about **systems, not just startups**. You'll explore how cities, schools, governments, and communities can **enable creativity, growth, and experimentation**, whether or not you launch a business.

Q2: Isn't Singapore too unique to copy?

A: True—you can't clone its model. But you can **adapt its principles**: trust-building, layered support, strategic funding, and infrastructure. Ask: *"What would this look like here, not there?"*

Q3: What if my country has talent—but no system?

A: That's exactly why this case matters. It shows how to **go from talent to traction**, using small moves that lead to ecosystem shifts: grants, space, mentors, storytelling, education reform, and more.

Q4: Do I need business or tech skills to do well in this case?

A: No. You need **systems awareness, creative thinking, and clarity of purpose**. Whether you're an artist, policy thinker, or coder—you bring something to the innovation table.

Q5: How can I make my project strong and original?

A:

- Use your country or school's **real constraints**
- Show how **Singapore's system inspired—not replaced—your idea**
- Address **barriers honestly** (e.g., cultural, funding, education gaps)
- Be specific: who benefits, what it costs, and how it grows

Support Tools

Need Help With...	Go To...
Understanding startup systems	Revisit the Block71, Startup SG, and SGInnovate models in your casebook
Finding real-world comparisons	See Section 9: Additional Resources
Getting feedback on your proposal	Ask peers, instructors, or mentors for input
Turning ideas into design	Use the Innovation Canvas or Policy Pitch format
Clarifying your own voice	Try the Founder's Diary or Reflection prompts in Section 7

Final Words of Encouragement

**"Entrepreneurship isn't just about solving problems.
It's about changing what's possible—for yourself, and for others."**

You now understand how bold ideas become reality—**when systems believe in them, and people build those systems.**

That can start with you.