English as the Working Language: summary

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English came to Singapore as the language of the colonial administration, the courts and the European firms, and spread through mission and government schools, the Queen's Scholarship and the colleges that became the University of Singapore. After self-government and independence the state recognised four official languages and kept Malay as the national language, yet chose English as the working language of government, law and business because it was neutral between the communities and connected the small republic with the world economy. Between the bilingual policy of 1966 and the single national education system of 1987, the schools moved almost all pupils into English-medium education, at the cost of the Chinese-medium schools, Nanyang University and much of the dialect heritage. By 2025 English had become the language most frequently spoken at home by a clear majority of residents, while Standard Singapore English and colloquial Singlish coexist as registers that most professionals switch between with ease. For the financial centre, English means that statutes, regulatory notices, contracts, court proceedings and arbitration all operate in the language of international finance, an advantage that Singapore shares with its main competitors and must combine with its Asian languages and its reputation for integrity to remain distinctive.

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