Irony of literature’s decline

TUESDAY’s article (“More subjects to choose from, so fewer take pure literature”) revealed the startling statistic that 3,500 students took pure literature last year, compared with 10,070 in 2006.

Senior Minister of State for Education Indranee Rajah said this decline “needs to be understood in the context of an education system responsive to a changing social context, and which has offered increasingly diverse choices for students.”

This is misleading. The initial decline in the number of students taking pure literature occurred in 1992, when the practice of ranking schools based on academic results started. The most significant dip occurred in 2001, when social studies was introduced as the compulsory “half” of the combined humanities subject. Thus, over the last two decades, literature has been a peripheral subject, not a mandatory subject. It is these two main reasons, and not the more recent offering of subjects like “drama, physical education, computing and economics” to basal curricular choice, that have led to the decline in enrollment for literature.

The decline has catalyzed a review into a twin history and geography when it comes to the selection of the subject for the other half of the combined humanities subject. A disproportionate number of students take the latter subjects rather than literature because they perceive geography and history to be factual content-heavy subjects that are easy to attain good grades in.

The nature of the social studies syllabus also provides the logic for this trend. Literature is better fit than literature as the complimentary subject. Left to “choice,” this is the kind of illusion that results.

This is surely a distortion of the holistic and integrated-driven approach in the education system today. We have to wonder: Did “more” mean more curricular choices for schools? Did it mean a better fit than literature as the complimentary subject? Left to “choice,” this is the kind of illusion that results.

As a literature educator, I am troubled by the huge drop in the number of students taking pure literature. Is this the fault of the national curriculum? (“More subjects to choose from, so fewer take pure literature”, Tuesday).

Senior Minister of State for Education Indranee Rajah explained that this decline was due to the “changing social context” and the “increasingly diverse choices being offered to students over the years, particularly in the form of combined humanities.”

Students taking combined humanities at the O levels study elementary social studies, but have to choose one of three options in the combined humanities: literature, history or geography. Given these choices, one is left wondering: Did “more curricular choices” lead more students to choose history and geography over literature, or even to avoid combined humanities altogether?

CNN Asia Pacific, which recently reported that Singapore is the second country in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) list, cited media reports suggesting that literature was becoming less popular because many perceived the subject to be difficult to score in.

According to official data, however, the pass and distinction rates in literature have increased slightly over the last 10 years. Whether the popularity of any subject is influenced by the students’ examination performance is, perhaps, not the main point.

After all, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been trying hard in recent years to lessen our students’ examination results and school rankings. Yet, educational research suggests that our nation’s economic growth has depended on part to a trial-and-error “testocracy” — a system of meritocracy based on high-stakes examination results in the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), Advanced Placement (AP) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCE) A levels. Meanwhile, the Scholastic Assessment Test and the International Baccalaureate, which literature has, in fact, become a casualty of an economically driven testocracy, has already been the target of such criticism.

Ironically, not publishing the examination results in the case of O-level humanities subjects has led to the popularization of this myth by the Ministry of Education. This is an example of the dynamic and changing nature of literature, and the policy of the Ministry of Education should reflect this.

Mr Rajah has affirmed the ministry’s stance to persuade schools to be less grade-conscious by not overly publicizing results. This is a step in the right direction for the Primary School Leaving Examination. Ironically, not publishing the examination results in the case of O-level humanities subjects has led to the popularization of this myth by the Ministry of Education. This is an example of the dynamic and changing nature of literature, and the policy of the Ministry of Education should reflect this.