

Not possible to ‘bubble wrap’ Singapore workers from foreign competition: Heng

But embracing openness does not mean leaving firms and people to fend for themselves, he says

Justin Ong
Political Correspondent

In the coming years, millions of university graduates in Asia alone will be added to the global talent pool, alongside the accelerating pace of technological change and disruption.

Against this backdrop, “the reality is that it is not possible to ‘bubble wrap’ (Singapore’s) workers from foreign competition and still expect to succeed”, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

Compounding the matter is the normalisation of remote work due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the recognition that “working from home” is just one step away from “working from anywhere”.

“Employers can easily seek out the best-skilled workers from all parts of the world... This means foreigners do not have to be in Singapore to compete with us,” said Mr Heng. “It would be increasingly difficult, if not impractical, to confine opportunities by geography.”

Mr Heng made these points in a pre-recorded speech at a forum on shaping the future of Singapore,

the last in a series organised to celebrate 115 years of the founding of the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Mr Heng then took to the stage in-person for a virtual dialogue with NUS staff, students and alumni. He was asked by moderator Suzaina Kadir, associate professor and vice-dean of academic affairs at NUS’ Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, how students about to enter the workforce could prepare themselves to be truly global.

The key lies in having a mindset orientated towards qualities of confidence, humility and openness, said Mr Heng, who is also Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies. “Confidence in ourselves, in what we can do and in how we can equip ourselves as best as we can to emphasise our creativity, imagination, ability to do some good.

“But, at the same time... you have to combine confidence with that humility to learn to be able to work with others. In particular, there will be many different ways of doing things, and we must not assume that our way is the best way.”

Mr Heng added: “Singaporeans venturing out need to have this mindset where we see what we can contribute to causes, and what it is



Singapore University of Social Sciences graduates at their convocation in April. Millions of university graduates in Asia alone are being added to the global talent pool, and the normalisation of remote work has made it easier for employers to seek out the best-skilled from all over the world, said Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat. ST FILE PHOTO

that we bring to and can learn from the discussion. That process, I think we can do a lot better.”

Earlier, during his speech, he described how Singapore’s founding generation had been creative in forging its own path and bucking conventional wisdom.

“We welcomed MNCs (multinational corporations) to invest here, when critics saw MNCs as the new colonialists. These investments went on to propel our rapid growth,” said Mr Heng.

“We developed a new airport in Changi, against the advice of

external consultants, which gave us an outsized presence on the world map.”

The common thread here was Singapore’s openness to the world. The Republic would not have succeeded if it had insulated itself, he noted.

But the DPM added that embracing openness did not mean leaving Singapore’s companies and people to fend for themselves.

He pointed to initiatives such as Industry Transformation Maps – now being refreshed for a post-pandemic world – alongside research, innovation and support for start-ups. Efforts in the SkillsFuture movement and in retraining and upskilling are also being ramped up.

“There is certainly room to adjust our foreign manpower policies. And there is scope to strengthen our laws on fair treatment at the workplace,” Mr Heng said. “But closing our doors is ineffective and provides a false promise of security.”

He cautioned against Singaporeans “boxing” themselves into a false choice.

“Instead, we should embrace openness and equip our people with the experience and skills to succeed,” said Mr Heng. “This way, our workers can remain confident about their position in the world, and know that they can continue to make a difference – not just when they are fresh out of school, but throughout life.

“This is the best way for Singapore and Singaporeans to continue thriving in a more interconnected, interdependent and technologically advanced world.”

justino@sph.com.sg



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat engaging in a virtual dialogue with staff, students and alumni at a forum organised by the National University of Singapore yesterday to commemorate its 115th anniversary. The question and answer segment was moderated by Associate Professor Suzaina Kadir, vice-dean (academic affairs) of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Singapore must build on key strengths, grow new ones: DPM

Linette Lai
Political Correspondent

As Singapore navigates the uncertain future, three strengths will buoy it up – its sense of unity, its people's creative capacity and the broader social compact forged over the years – Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

But these traits are not “intrinsically enduring”, he cautioned, outlining issues in each area that Singaporeans can work to improve.

“As quickly as these strengths have blossomed, they can also wither if we do not adapt,” said Mr Heng. “To have a better future, we must build on these strengths, and be prepared to grow new ones.”

He was speaking on shaping Singapore's future at a forum organised by the National University of Singapore (NUS) to commemorate its 115th anniversary.

On national unity, the minister stressed the importance of exercising

humility and forbearance in handling differences.

This is especially the case when engaging with the deep and emotive issues of race and religion, where recent incidents have made clear that Singaporeans desire to do better as a society on this front.

But as with most social issues, there are different ideas on how progress can be made, he observed. In particular, young people – who did not experience the chaotic years of Singapore's independence and tend to be generally better educated, with more exposure to global events and trends – are more comfortable with expressing their thoughts on such issues openly on social media.

“It is useful to appreciate that we not only have different opinions on these issues, but also different ways to approach them,” said Mr Heng.

This means being humble enough to recognise and correct one's biases and blind spots on matters such as race. And when people

call out transgressions, they should also have the humility to not assume the worst of every action and comment, he said.

Individuals should also exercise forbearance when engaging with others on such topics, Mr Heng added. “Progress cannot be made by advocating loudly for a single viewpoint. We should instead seek out the different perspectives and expand the space for convergence,” he said.

Doing so will contribute to the “precious, but fragile” unity here, which is one of the country's greatest strengths, he observed.

On the issue of creativity, Mr Heng spoke of how early generations of Singaporeans bucked conventional wisdom to forge their own paths, which helped the economy take off.

In doing so, they were open to the world – just as Singaporeans must be today. While there is room to adjust foreign manpower policies, Singapore cannot close its doors, Mr Heng said, adding that to do so only

provides a false sense of security.

“We must not box ourselves into a false choice. Instead, we should both embrace openness and equip our people with the experience and skills to succeed. This is how we will thrive in a rapidly evolving world.”

On Singapore's social compact, he highlighted three groups of people for whom more needs to be done. These are low-wage workers, the elderly and those with mental health issues. In each case, the wider community plays a role in helping to meet their needs, he said.

For instance, employers must help low-wage workers upskill, even as consumers must be prepared to pay a little more to improve their wages.

And every individual has a role to play in helping seniors remain actively engaged and supporting others' mental well-being, he said.

“A stronger social compact requires a collective societal effort,” he said.

“We must continue to strengthen this. Increasingly, this will have to

go beyond government measures and redistributive policies.”

The common thread running through these three strengths is that each individual plays a role in building a better future, he added, highlighting two incidents he encountered as a young policeman.

In the first, he visited scenes affected by the 1981 Brixton riots in Britain in a reinforced vehicle, as animosity was so great that trust between the authorities and people had broken down.

In the second, he saw in the early 1980s how Japan's koban system established police officers as part of the communities they were stationed in.

“This goes beyond policing,” Mr Heng said. “If relationships can be built up over time, if people care for one another, they will look out for each other, and we will have a more cohesive society.”

linettel@sph.com.sg

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MEETING IN THE MIDDLE

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DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER HENG SWEKEAT, on how individuals should exercise forbearance when engaging with others on the deep and emotive issues of race and religion.

STAYING OPEN TO THE WORLD

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MR HENG, on how Singapore cannot close its doors to the world when it comes to foreign manpower policies.

COLLECTIVE EFFORT

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MR HENG, on how every individual has a role to play in helping seniors remain actively engaged and supporting others' mental well-being.