

Not possible to 'bubble wrap' Singaporeans from foreign competition, especially with rise of remote work: DPM Heng

It would be increasingly difficult, if not impractical, to confine opportunities by geography, he adds

Singapore

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", said Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on Friday. 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."

He 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 the National University of Singapore's (NUS) 115 years of founding. 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, an associate professor and vice dean of academic affairs of 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 toward 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



DPM Heng (far left) engaging NUS staff, students and alumni in a Q&A segment moderated by Assoc Prof Suzaina Kadir of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, inside the auditorium of Shaw Foundation Alumni House in NUS on Friday.
BT PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

some good," he explained. "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 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 invest-

ments went on to propel our rapid growth," noted 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 said. But he 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 national 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 acknowledged. "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 both 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." THE STRAITS TIMES