

Singapore well placed to draw global talent: Conference panel

But talent push must be in tandem with social support to avoid inequality, say panellists

Tham Yuen-C
Senior Political Correspondent

In a world where working remotely has become more commonplace, making it easier for people to relocate, cities like Singapore, which offer not just a good business environment but also quality of life, will have a competitive edge in attracting global talent.

But while the mobility of the global workforce allows Singapore to compete for talent in a way that was not possible before, this could also worsen inequality, said panellists at the Singapore Perspectives conference yesterday.

That is why the pursuit of economic achievement must happen in tandem with improvements in other social dimensions, they added.

Harvard University economist Edward Glaeser, Ministry of Trade and Industry Permanent Secretary Gabriel Lim and Landfall Strategy Group founding director David Skilling were speaking at the “City as Economic Space” session on the challenges and opportunities that Singapore faces in its ongoing urban economic development.

While cities emptied out in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic and social restrictions have altered the way people work and live, these changes will not add up to cities and offices becoming obsolete as predicted by some, said Professor Glaeser in recorded remarks.

“In a world of information intensity, we get smart by being around other smart people, we get creative by being around other smart people,” he added.

In fact, technology such as Zoom will not kill off cities, but has given people more choices in terms of where they want to live, increasing competition for global talent.

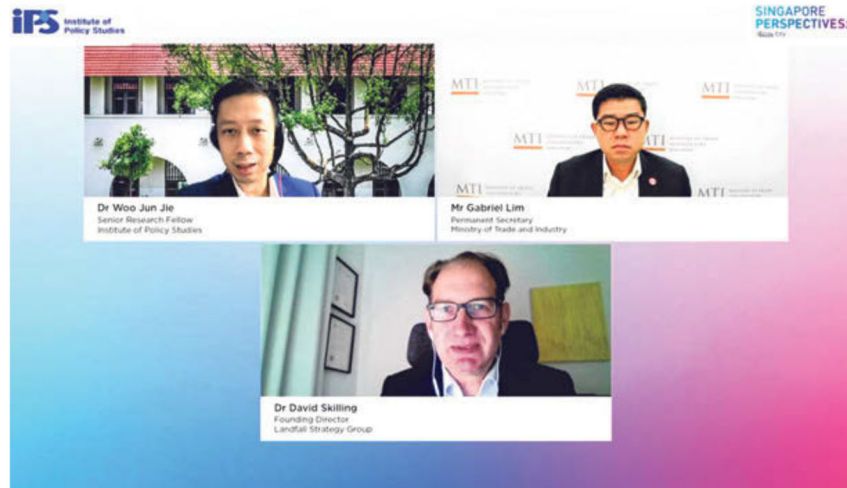
And with human capital key to a city’s success, the question is whether Singapore can reinvent itself to become the best place for people who can work anywhere to live, work and play, said Mr Lim.

He acknowledged the sensitivity that might arise from this talent policy, noting that people around the world have become anxious from competition.

To assuage these concerns, the Government is adjusting its manpower policies to strike a balance between openness and assurance for workers, as well as strengthening institutional support to help people upgrade, such as through the SGUnited Jobs and Skills programme, he said.

Mr Lim added that the Government is also paying special attention to social support and community care for those who are less skilled and more vulnerable.

“I want to assure... members of the public that we are not just these very mercenary people. We understand that all of us are involved in nation building, and the only way to build a nation is to make sure that it is inclusive, that people see in Singapore a home for



Dr Woo Jun Jie, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies; Mr Gabriel Lim, Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Trade and Industry; and Dr David Skilling, founding director of Landfall Strategy Group, at the Singapore Perspectives conference yesterday. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

all, and it’s united, it’s cohesive,” he said in response to questions about people being left behind in Singapore’s pursuit of being a global economic hub.

Even if Singapore does not develop as a global city, it does not mean that there will be fewer people left behind, he added, citing how the Covid-19 pandemic and previous recessions have shown that it is always the vulnerable who are more badly hit when the economy does not do well.

“I think what’s important for us is to continue to maintain that focus on growth, but at the same time making a special effort on re-

distribution, making sure that it is more inclusive and giving everyone a greater share of the prosperity,” said Mr Lim.

This sentiment was shared by Dr Skilling, who noted that when growth is more broadly shared, governments can pursue open markets more aggressively and on a more sustained basis.

But he noted that while Singapore may enjoy the best of both worlds in terms of being a country and a city, it also faces the challenges of both worlds.

“The complication for Singapore is that Singapore is both simultaneously a country and a

city,” he added.

He said other global cities like London and New York, for instance, can focus on per capita income and do not need to worry so much about income distribution or cost of living, since people there can quite easily leave for other lower-cost areas of those countries – an option that is not open to Singaporeans.

So while it makes sense to benchmark itself against such big global cities, Singapore simply cannot replicate their policies and must chart its own path, he added.

yuen@sph.com.sg