

# Project guides S'poreans, foreigners to find common ground on integration

**Aim was to find the cause of the “growing angst” towards foreigners, says researcher**

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Singaporeans and foreigners came together to talk about the role of multiculturalism, jobs and the economy, and other thorny topics in a pilot to find common ground for integration between the two groups.

The group of 24, comprising 16 Singaporeans, five foreigners and three permanent residents, generated 67 statements about these issues and achieved unanimous consensus on 23 of them.

But the level of consensus was not uniform across all areas.

These patterns reveal where common ground is achievable and where disagreement persists, and

statements on the distribution of resources were more tractable than questions of national identity, said researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in a report on the pilot.

On community life, which covered issues like mutual respect, the group reached consensus on 14 of 18 statements, while on education, it got there on four out of 16.

On jobs, the group had 100 per cent agreement on four out of 18 statements, but on multiculturalism, only one out of 15 statements got full agreement.

Some examples of these statements include: “Singapore’s openness to the world and support for multiculturalism and diversity help welcome people of different nationalities without losing who

we are”, and “Singaporeans should be given priority at local education institutions, including universities, even as we uphold the principle of meritocracy”.

The pilot is a local adaptation of a discussion model first used in Denmark, known as a consensus conference. IPS and REACH ran the project in East Coast GRC in November and its results were released at a panel on Jan 20.

During the project, participants were given an information kit and background materials, heard from an expert on the topic, and were given time to ask questions.

They then drafted the 67 statements in small groups before moving to find consensus. At this stage, the proposer of each statement asked the group: “Can you live with this?” If everyone answered yes, the statement became common ground.

If even one person could not accept it, the person would tell the

group why and what tweaks were needed to the position.

The project ran over four weekends.

IPS research fellow Nicholas Thomas said in a presentation on the pilot’s results that the aim of the project was to listen to the views of foreigners and local-born Singaporeans, and to find out what is causing the “growing angst” in Singapore towards foreigners.

Researchers found that narratives omitting Singaporeans’ contributions left them feeling like they were not sufficiently acknowledged when it came to local-foreign issues.

Messaging that foregrounds foreign talent contributions can be balanced with explicit acknowledgment of what citizens contribute through taxes and national service, the report on the project said.

It also found that policy language positioning citizens as recipients of government generosity rather

than stakeholders can be reviewed, and that data on contentious issues may be available but not easily discoverable.

It recommended dedicating institutional attention to local-foreign integration “as a distinct pillar of Singapore’s multiculturalism”, and strengthening public communication with attention to recognition, framing and data discoverability on official channels.

It also asked for the pilot to be expanded, to see if the results could be replicated across Singapore.

Researchers found that 95.8 per cent of participants reported a positive experience, 91.6 per cent described it as meaningful, and 87.5 per cent felt the process was empowering.

They found that 83.3 per cent believed the model could be replicated across other constituencies, communities or topics.

All participants agreed that facilitators recorded views respectfully even when disagreement occurred.

These results were encouraging, said REACH chairman Tan Kiat How at the Jan 20 panel.

Mr Tan, who is also Senior Minister of State for Digital Development and Information, and Health, said REACH will continue to expand its experimental approaches as part of its next stage of growth.

The government feedback unit is committed to “creating more spaces where Singaporeans can safely discuss what matters most to them”, he said.

“The reality is this – if we do not talk about differences, friction will escalate,” added Mr Tan, who is al-

so MP for East Coast GRC, where the project was run.

He said he is cautiously optimistic about the pilot’s results, as it required a significant investment of time and a level of vulnerability from participants, and they showed up and put themselves forward despite how contentious the topic was.

He added that such a mode of engagement can create a safe space for difficult discussions and allows for a deeper and richer perspective on such issues.

It is complementary to other tools like surveys and listening points, he noted, which can allow policymakers to balance these perspectives.

IPS’ Mr Thomas noted that the institute has found signs of strain in social integration between locals and foreigners in Singapore, and that more than a third of Singaporeans anticipated anger against some communities if immigration is mismanaged.

Government policy can address resource allocation and jobs, but cannot manufacture mutual trust and understanding, he said.

The project hence seeks to test if a structured deliberative process can “surface latent tensions” and enable people to find common ground – independent of any policy change, he added.

“The question now is whether we will invest in further civic infrastructure. The foundation is there, the method works – what we need is the will to scale it and partners to build it with us,” he said.

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