

More than 50% of young Singaporeans believe foreigners use the country as a stepping stone: Survey

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More young Singaporeans polled in a survey were sceptical about the long-term commitment of immigrants to Singapore, despite recognising that the country has benefitted from the presence of foreign talent.

Conducted by local think-tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the survey aimed to study the emigration attitudes of young Singaporeans, polling over 2,000 respondents aged between 19 and 30 during face-to-face interviews between Jun and Nov 2016. This was the second survey of its kind, following one conducted in 2010.

According to the survey findings released on Friday (Sep 28), 55.9 per cent of respondents thought foreign talent used Singapore as a stepping stone to other countries, up 10.4 percentage points from 2010.

Almost half (48 per cent) of the respondents also felt that having too much foreign talent diluted the cohesiveness of society, an increase of close to 10 percentage points from six years before.

However, 62.5 per cent of respondents believed that foreign talent contributed to Singapore's development as much as locals, up 17.1 percentage points from 2010.

"Over time, Singaporeans have come to understand that foreign talent make a contribution economically and they help to grow the pie," IPS deputy director of research Gillian Koh told Channel NewsAsia. "But from the results, people are not sure if it would translate directly to jobs and opportunities for Singaporeans, and also whether it will erode social cohesion."

Respondents were divided into four main clusters based on their emigration attitudes and responses to the survey, namely: Disconnected Stayers (31.6 per cent), Flourishing Stayers (29.1 per cent), the Disconnected (11.6 per cent) and the Explorers (27.7 per cent).

Those in the "Disconnected" and "Explorers" groups had a high level of intention to emigrate and felt that emigration has a positive impact on one's social and economic status, said the researchers.

When it came to attitudes regarding foreign talent, the "Explorers" felt the greatest sense of relative deprivation between locals and foreigners.

"That sense of threat (from foreigners) is the highest from one particular cluster – the 'Explorers', so it's not an across the board ambivalence of views that are held in tension for everyone," explained Dr Koh.

Conducted by Dr Koh, Ms Debbie Soon and Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, the survey also highlighted that the level of intention to emigrate was similar to findings in 2010.

Preferred countries for emigration

Nearly one in five (18.3 per cent) respondents had thought about emigrating to another country to live there very frequently or all the time, down 2.9 percentage points from 2010.

"Government policy has made it sweeter for young Singaporeans to stay, in terms of educational opportunities, political stability, healthcare, even housing," said Dr Koh.

On the other hand, nearly a third (29.2 per cent) strongly agreed or agreed that they would actively examine the possibility of emigrating to another country within the next five years as compared to 26.4 per cent six years before.

Those with higher education, those who spoke English at home, older respondents and males were also more likely to think of emigrating, the latest survey found.

Key factors which keep young Singaporeans rooted include having family members here, public health and safety, as well as having friends in Singapore.

The researchers also found that Australia strengthened its position as the preferred emigration destination for Singaporeans, with 35.6 per cent or 716 respondents opting for it.

This was followed by New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom.

"Populist movements" in countries such as the US and the UK could lead to young Singaporeans thinking twice about these destinations, explained Dr Koh.

"In those destinations, there's been the rise of not just populism, but tribalism and from there a sense of xenophobia, so maybe at the back of young Singaporeans' minds, they will also consider how welcoming those destinations will be."

The survey also saw large improvements in levels of national pride and life satisfaction, with close to 80 per cent saying that they preferred being a citizen of Singapore than any other country in the world, up from 57.2 per cent in 2010.

More than half (58 per cent) of respondents also said that they were satisfied with their life compared to 43.1 per cent in 2010.

While most felt that Singapore would continue to be economically prosperous over the next 10 years, researchers also noted that only 29.8 per cent of those surveyed felt that there would be sufficient jobs and opportunities for every citizen in the same time period.