

National Service a key indicator of integration: study

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SINGAPORE: A new study has placed National Service (NS) as a key indicator of integration for foreigners.

The report by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) seeks to examine what immigrants ought to do in order to be regarded as a full participating member of Singapore society.

The study covered some 2,000 local and foreign born citizens. Half of the new citizens got their citizenship just 10 years ago or earlier.

They were asked several questions on what they thought were social markers of integration. Such as - should a new citizen be gainfully employed, complete NS or be married to a local - to be seen as a Singaporean?

The study showed some perceptual gaps, which researchers said are cause for fault-lines within the community.

The biggest area of incongruence - that the son of a new citizen undergoes NS.

About 70 per cent of Singaporeans feel it is an important indicator of integration, while only about 40 per cent of new citizens think so.

IPS said about a third of them choose not to do so.

Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, said: "Of course, there are consequences to the NS-liable Permanent Resident who skip NS.

"So for example, they won't be granted a work visa or be considered for a permanent residency application again in the future.

"But the hard truth is that while they are a PR in Singapore, they would have enjoyed all the benefit, all the privileges of being a PR and then when it comes to the time for them to perform their national obligation, they skip town all together.

"So for the Singaporeans who diligently perform and complete their National Service, it's actually very unfair to them."

In a statement to Channel NewsAsia, the Defence Ministry said NS-liable PRs or new citizens who choose not to serve would have committed an offence under the Enlistment Act and treated as defaulters.

They could face the maximum penalty of a S\$10,000 fine and three years' jail term.

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen told parliament on November 2011 that over the past five years, about 8,800 males who had become permanent residents under the sponsorship of their parents were enlisted for and served NS.

In that same period, about 4,200 males who had become PRs, renounced their PR status prior to serving NS.

MINDEF added that first generation PRs who are able to contribute to Singapore economically immediately upon the grant of PR status are administratively exempted from NS.

If they obtain Singapore Citizenship subsequently, they continue to be exempted.

The children of such PRs or new citizens though, must serve NS and will be enlisted after the age of 18.

"Their failure to serve NS will be taken into account when they subsequently apply to study or work in Singapore, or when they try to have their PR status reinstated," added the ministry.

But Dr Leong Chan-Hoong said more can be done.

"To preserve the sanctity and legitimacy of this social institution, it is important that we look at this issue further.

"Perhaps we can consider some kind of a security bond imposed on the second generation Permanent Resident, so for example, at the age of 12 or 13, the government could consider imposing some kind of bond which is similar or comparable to what Singaporeans would have to pay if they send their kids to study overseas and if the PRs choose not to fulfill their national obligation, then this amount of the bond money would be forfeited."

The other top areas of divergent viewpoints are: a new citizen getting on well with workplace colleagues, being gainfully employed, and having the ability to speak conversational English.

More Singaporeans than new immigrants feel these are all important attributes for integration.

The study also showed that Singaporeans who tend to be less inclusive are tertiary educated, come from the middle income group, have strong family ties and are more nationalistic.

Researchers said it boils down to the group that feel the most threatened by the presence of foreigners.

However, the study also showed that Singaporeans embrace multi-racialism.

The study showed they do not expect foreigners to discard their cultural identity, even as these foreigners embrace core beliefs held by Singaporeans, such as meritocracy and religious tolerance.

On the policy implications of the study, researchers said the Singapore Armed Forces may need to reach out more at the community level, for example, in convincing first generation new citizens of the value of NS.

They added that more could also be done to facilitate the learning of English among foreigners.

They have also called for more transparency in data on immigration.

These include details on specific sectors foreigners are employed in and the criteria for obtaining a PR status.

Researchers added businesses should also think about programmes to improve workplace relations between Singaporeans and foreigners.

And because the issue of foreigners is such an emotive one in Singapore, Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute, from the School of Social Sciences at the Singapore Management University, Professor David Chan, said policy makers should not simply take a rational approach when addressing concerns.

"I think it is very important not just for government but all parties to recognise that emotions are not a bad thing. The important issue is first to understand the origin of this emotion, what is the nature of this emotion? Why do people feel that way, recognise the intensity of the emotions and understand the cognitive and the behavioural implications of the emotions.

"In other words, if people feel this way, with this intensity, what is the likelihood that people would think in another way or think in a particular way or act in a particular way. And that should be part of the policy consideration and part of the long term interest of the people because it affects the national resilience of the country," said Prof Chan.

About a quarter of Singapore's total population is now made up of foreigners. And recent studies show that Singapore needs to continue with its open immigration policy to address the country's ageing population and falling birth rate.