

First Independent Study Shows Singaporeans see Value in NS

Koh Eng Beng

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Over nine out of 10 Singaporeans support National Service (NS). Besides its importance for national defence, it has helped to instil discipline and values among the young as well as bring people from different backgrounds together.

These were the key findings from the first-ever independent research study, conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), on Singaporeans' perception of NS.

A representative sample of 1,251 people were interviewed from July to September this year.

Members of the Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS) steering committee were briefed on the survey findings when they met for their fourth meeting on 8 Oct. Held at the Home Team Academy, the meeting was hosted by Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen.

CSNS member Dr Lim Wee Kiat said: "I am very happy to see the result of this IPS survey and it re-affirms our belief that NS is still a very well-supported institution among the population."

Nine out of 10 Operationally Ready National Servicemen (NSmen) generally felt that their employers were supportive of NS, and more than three-quarters of employed servicemen said their employers would take their NS commitments into account and adjust their workload.

CSNS member Mr Wong Wei Peng, who runs a training company, said he values employees who had served NS. They often possess soft skills such as "management, competency planning and rigour of thought" which were picked up during their NS days.

"They have the experience of managing their peers... are more matured and better decision makers," he added.

Mr Wong also suggested that one way to improve employer support is to "organise forums to bring (them) together for sharing and discussions".

"They can share their best practices on how to plan ahead or deal with the disruption when NSmen employees have to leave for NS. I know some companies have good and established human resource (HR) policies which are worth sharing."

When asked which factor is likely to motivate NSmen in their NS duties, most respondents ranked job fit as the most important.

Dr Lim, a Member of Parliament for Nee Soon GRC, noted that the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) could look into matching servicemen's skills to their vocations.

But he pointed out: "If you can align them, I am sure they (servicemen) would be more motivated to serve the country. But there will be some who will try to game the system. We have to calibrate and balance this. But I think it is a good first step forward."

The study also found that the broader community wants to play a part in national defence. Although about eight of 10 of Singaporeans said that women should not be made to go through two years full-time NS, they felt that women should be given the chance to volunteer in one way or another.

More than half of the respondents also felt that first generation Permanent Residents (PR), who are currently exempted from NS, should be given the chance to volunteer or serve in a professional role in defence.

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, one of the researchers involved in the study, noted that the findings, which were mostly positive, were contrary to the general negative sentiments found in the online community.

Adding that the survey was an independent academic study that "brought out the voice of the ordinary Singaporeans", he said: "I think it's important to look at the perception of NS critically and in a more scientific rigorous way... After so much has been debated online and offline, what exactly is the sentiment on NS?"

"On the whole, NS is, from the ordinary citizens' point of view, not just for just to fulfil the defence mandate but also (plays) a very strong part in nation building. There is interest from different groups within the community to contribute to defence for Singapore."

Dr Leong added: "I think there are opportunities for policy makers to see how we can tap (into this) passion. The important thing is to take NS as a collective journey. It's not just the responsibility of the men but the responsibility of all citizens in general."

The CSNS is coming to the end of the second phase of public consultations. The third phase, which will discuss possible proposals in more detail, will begin with town hall meetings in end-October.

Members of the public who are interested in participating can sign up at www.strengthenNS.sg.

The full result of the IPS study is available at <http://mindef.sg/GFSCnG>