



IPS-REACH

Consensus Conference

on Local-Foreign Integration

RESIDENTS' REPORT

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Executive Summary	3
Summary of Shared Positions	3
Statement 1	13
Common Ground	14
Near Consensus	17
No Go	19
Statement 2	21
Common Ground	23
Near Consensus	24
No Go	27
Statement 3	31
Common Ground	32
Near Consensus	34
No Go	36
Statement 4	39
Common Ground	40
Near Consensus	41
No Go	43
Community Project	46
Overview and Purpose	47
Project Design and Participation	47
Roles and Modes of Interaction	47
Intended Outcomes and Next Steps	47
Acknowledgements	49

Introduction

Executive Summary

This Residents' Report summarises what we, the participants in the Consensus Conference, could and could not live with when we discussed local-foreign integration in Singapore. Participants included Singapore citizens (local-born and naturalised), Permanent Residents (PRs), and foreigners on Employment Pass (EP) and Long-Term Visit Pass (LTVP).

Through facilitated conversations over 3 full days, each of us proposed specific statements and indicated whether each was something we "could live with" or "cannot live with". We then actively debated each one and grouped statements:

- **Common ground:** 100% of participants who indicated "I can live with it".
- **Near consensus:** More than 85% indicated "I can live with it".
- **No-go:** Less than 85% indicated "I can live with it".

Summary of Shared Positions

Across our discussions on community life, jobs, education and identity, these shared positions emerged:

- **We supported cordial relationships, mutual respect, reciprocity, and simple everyday gestures**, not "equal effort" or "deep relationships" as a general baseline for everyone.
- **We wanted to preserve meritocracy but also supported conditional priority for Singaporeans in jobs and publicly funded education.** These priority considerations should be made visible via educational institution websites for greater assurance.
- **We were critical of narratives that appeared to over-emphasise dependence on foreign professionals, while neglecting that Singaporeans too contributed to Singapore's economic growth.** In tandem, formulations that implied foreigners are mainly here to train locals and

then step aside to take on a different role were contentious because for foreigners it could be viewed as undermining merit-based progression.

- **We wanted visible safeguards, checks and enforcement in the labour market and education system**, and clear differentiation for citizens through job visibility, admission priority and fee structures. Beyond the current measures, which were acknowledged, there should also be an even clearer distinction between Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents.
- **We accepted openness and diversity but expected reciprocity and respect from foreigners, given that Singapore is hosting them.** We also preferred gradual, self-determined changes to norms and identity, rather than change that felt imposed or driven only by economic reasons.

Even though some of us had been retrenched before, we also recognise that more jobless or struggling Singaporeans who felt they had been replaced by foreigners, as well as work permit holders and domestic helpers, would have added greater texture to the Consensus Conference. Their perspectives are likely stronger and would need separate attention.

1. Living Together in the Community

We started from the statement that both locals and foreigners should make equal effort and build deep relationships. We agreed with the intention and ethos, but not the framing.

1.1. Common Ground

We could live with a position where:

- Everyone should make an effort to learn about and accept one another, as long as something is not unlawful or disrespectful.
- Mutual respect, reciprocity and social cohesion are important foundations for living together as one society.
- Residents should be at least cordial and mindful of one another in daily life.
- Simple gestures, such as a greeting or offering help when someone looks lost, are a realistic bar that can build trust over time.

Integration is a collaborative effort between government, Singaporeans, Permanent Residents, and foreigners. The government can set policies, create platforms and act as a leader. However, policy alone cannot create trust, and it may not fully consider the lived realities of many residents in Singapore. These policies come to life through everyday behaviour. Again, this is still insufficient, and ground-up goodwill alone cannot address structural issues. Therefore, it is critical that this collaborative effort takes place.

Fairness and equity matter. Neither Singapore Citizens, PRs nor foreigners should bear all the responsibility on their own for reaching out to one another. There should be a balance. It is also equally important for foreigners to recognise that their residency in Singapore is a privilege that goes beyond economic contribution. It is one that also carries civic responsibilities.

1.2. Near Consensus and No-go

Tension arose when expectations were set too high or too broad:

- “Equal effort” as a general norm felt unrealistic and unfair, especially to Singaporeans who expected newcomers to take more initiative to understand local norms.
- “Deep relationships” as a baseline felt too ambitious. Many saw cordial, friendly relations as already meaningful.

2. Jobs and Foreign Professionals

On employment, we discussed the statement that foreign professionals contribute to Singapore's economic growth, but Singaporeans must still be given preferential access to jobs and career progression.

2.1. Common Ground

We could live with a position where:

- Singaporeans should be considered first for jobs when they meet the required skillsets and competencies. Preferential treatment is conditional on meeting the bar.
- “Best person for the job” remains the principle for hiring, regardless of nationality.
- There should be checks, balances and strong prosecution for unfair or discriminatory hiring.
- Singaporeans and foreign professionals can work together and jointly contribute to economic growth.

For many of us, “preferential access” was clearest and most acceptable when it meant priority visibility and serious consideration, not guaranteed hiring. For example, jobs first visible on local job platforms, e.g. MyCareersFuture to Singaporeans were broadly seen as sensible if implemented honestly. Both Singaporeans and foreigners supported a system where the best person is selected on merit, provided Singaporeans are not shut out from viewing or accessing opportunities.

2.2. Near Consensus and No-go

Several tensions pushed statements into near consensus or no-go:

- Some of us questioned framings that implied the economy would falter without foreign professionals and asked whether such narratives sufficiently acknowledge Singaporeans' contribution to growth.
- Words like “priority” and “preferential” were reassuring for some Singaporeans but sat uneasily with strong attachment to meritocracy for others.
- Stories of being “easily replaced” or “undercut” by foreigners, perceived as willing to take lower pay, affected the principle of meritocracy, or best person for the job.

- Despite information on the government's policies, we expressed doubts and highlighted concerns about biases in HR practices and hiring especially when the HR department leaders are foreigners.

On skills transfer and Employment Pass holders, many Singaporeans supported the idea that EP holders help train locals so a Singaporean can eventually take over. Foreigners, especially those who saw Singapore as a long-term home, did not fully agree. Statements that foreign professionals must train locals and then be "managed out" attracted high "cannot live with it" responses and clearly fell into no-go territory, in part because they appeared to undermine the meritocratic principle for career progression and could discourage committed talent.

3. Education: Meritocracy with Priority for Citizens in Publicly Funded Places

On education, we discussed the statement that Singaporeans should be given priority at local education institutions, including universities, while upholding meritocracy.

3.1. Common Ground

We could live with a position where:

- Meritocracy remained the organising principle. All students, regardless of citizenship status, must meet minimum admission criteria.
- Within that qualified pool, Singaporeans should have a clearer and more secure pathway into local institutions, especially universities and other publicly funded places.
- Local institutions should remain open and welcoming to strong foreign students who enrich the academic community, while protecting strong opportunities for Singaporeans.
- Every Singapore child should be given ample opportunities to excel, with support such as means testing so background does not block admission.

We saw this as part of a social compact. Publicly funded institutions have a unique responsibility to Singapore Citizens. We were also comfortable with clear differences in school fees between citizens, PRs and foreigners, and supported means testing for those who needed financial support.

3.2. Near Consensus and No-go

Tensions arose around scope and instruments:

- Some of us preferred that explicit priority focus on universities, noting that primary and secondary schools already prioritise citizens.
- Statements referring to “equally qualified” local and foreign candidates felt unrealistic to some, given multi-dimensional admission criteria, and raised worries about how such clauses would be interpreted.
- Proposals that sounded like quotas or caps for foreign students at local schools fell into no-go, as they were seen as too blunt and too rigid.
- Scholarships for foreign students attracted mixed views. Some opposed them, others accepted them only on a bonded basis, even if they did not take a tuition grant.

- We could not find consensus on the fee differences between citizens, PRs and foreigners. While they understood the need for differentiation, foreigners shared that education was their largest expenditure, even for primary-school going children.

During the Consensus Conference, we also realised that some of us significantly overestimated the proportion of foreign students in publicly funded universities. When the actual (lower) figures were explained by the IPS research team, it helped show that perceptions of crowding out can be sharper than the data suggests. Despite the assurance from the data, concerns about priority for citizens remained. It would be useful for this to be explicitly reflected and communicated on all publicly funded universities and the Ministry of Education's website.

4. Openness and Multiculturalism

On openness and identity, we worked from a statement about Singapore's openness and support for multiculturalism and diversity.

4.1. Common Ground

We could live with a position where it:

- Reflects Singapore as already multicultural and globally connected.
- States clearly that foreigners must respect local norms and values and not impose their own.
- Signals that our national identity is important, openness has limits and identity needs to feel familiar and rooted.

4.2. Near Consensus and No-go

Several statements came close to common ground but did not reach 100%:

- Statements that emphasised Singapore's openness and multicultural "DNA", government support for multiculturalism and the need for shared norms almost reached full agreement.
- They fell short when they placed more emphasis on openness than on safeguarding local norms, or sounded too top down, as if multiculturalism was engineered rather than growing through interaction.

"No-go" lines helped clarify boundaries:

- We did not want to feel compelled to accept changes to local norms and practices that are seen as imposed by foreigners.
- Many preferred organic change through long-term interaction, rather than change driven mainly by policies.
- We were cautious about adapting cultural norms solely for economic reasons, such as attracting investment or talent.
- Vague statements about welcoming "all" without clear reciprocity and boundaries were difficult to agree on.

Overall, we want Singapore to stay open, but with clear expectations that foreigners respect local norms, and that identity changes remain self-determined rather than imposed.

5. Community Project: Triad Trails / Food Heritage Trails

As a concrete follow-up to the Consensus Conference, we co-developed a prototype community project, "Triad Trails / Food Heritage Trails." The project translates the shared positions on cordial relationships, mutual respect, realistic expectations and shared responsibility for integration into practice, anchored in Changi Simei and East Coast GRC.

The project is an event-based heritage trail to be held on a weekend after Chinese New Year 2026. It will bring together about 30 residents, a mix of local and foreign participants living in Changi Simei and East Coast GRC, to visit sites in Chinatown and Geylang that reflect Singapore's history, informal economies and food culture. Ex-offenders will serve as tour guides, supported by community volunteers who handle research, facilitation and coordination. The focus is on shared experiences, informal conversations and simple gestures, to foster local-foreign integration.

Through this design, the project aims to increase interaction between locals and foreigners, deepen understanding of the history behind local cultural practices, and strengthen integration through reciprocity. If the pilot is successful, we hope that similar ground-up initiatives, supported by community institutions, can be scaled or adapted to other groups and neighbourhoods.

6. Suggestions for Future Research, Policy and Engagement

For the government, researchers and community partners, we highlight the following:

- Keep expectations for everyday integration realistic, focused on cordial relationships, mutual respect, reciprocity, and simple gestures.
- Clarify how meritocracy and conditional priority for Singaporeans work together in employment and education. This includes outlining priority visibility and access for job, and to explicitly reflect and communicate admission figures on all publicly funded universities and the Ministry of Education's website.
- Review public narratives on foreign professionals' contribution to Singapore's economic growth, and to actively acknowledge Singaporeans' contributions to growth as well. It is also vital to avoid overstating dependence on foreigners. Additionally, some foreigners see Singapore as a potential home, and it would not be useful to imply that foreigners are merely in Singapore temporarily .
- Strengthen safeguards, checks and transparent communication on hiring, retrenchment and admissions, to sustain trust in fairness.
- Make key data on foreign presence and enforcement outcomes more accessible and understandable, to help narrow perception gaps.
- Create future platforms like this Consensus Conference to openly discuss issues where we have differing perspectives. It is also important to sustain the conversation, which deliberately include jobless or struggling Singaporeans, work permit holders and domestic helpers, so that integration policies and community efforts respond more fully to their lived experiences.

Integration Requires an Ongoing, Coordinated Effort

Integration is a long-term effort. Just as Singapore puts in steady work to manage race and religion carefully, it is equally important that integration between locals and foreigners receives planned, sustained effort from different groups in society. Platforms like these are a good start, but this work needs to continue over time.

Singaporeans are a welcoming people. However, it is vital that Singapore stays open to the world and to different nationalities, while keeping a firm grip on "who we are", how change happens, and the pace of change over time.

We offer this report as a participant-generated reference point on where our group found common ground, where we were close but not fully aligned, and where expectations remained too contested to treat as shared positions. We hope it will be useful for all partners involved.

Statement 1

Community Life

We agreed with the intention behind this statement, yet we identified two main sources of discomfort:

- “**Equal effort**” felt unrealistic and, for many Singaporeans, unfair because the expectations are too high. Many of the Singaporeans felt the onus was on foreigners to get to know Singaporeans better. Several Singaporeans felt that newcomers should take more initiative to understand local norms, rather than expecting identical effort from both sides in all situations.
- “**Deep relationships**” sounded ideal, but many saw it as too ambitious as a baseline expectation. They felt that starting with cordial, friendly relations is already a meaningful and achievable goal.

The group therefore moved away from “equal effort” and “deep relationships” and worked towards a framing that sets a realistic bar for everyday local-foreign integration, while keeping mutuality and reciprocity as a guiding principle.

Common Ground

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion
Mindset and values for integration / living together
I believe all residents should make efforts in learning and accepting each other in the country.
All residents should keep an open mind, as long as something is not unlawful or disrespectful, in order to build harmonious relations in the country.
I believe that in Singapore, everybody needs to be mindful in order to maintain cordial relationships.
In Singapore, I believe that mutual respect and social cohesion are important.
What the community, together with the government, can do
More events focused on local foreigner integration can be organised for both locals and foreigners to build relationships.

In Singapore, we believe it takes strong collaboration between locals, foreigners and Government to make integration work.

In Singapore, we believe that it takes two hands to clap for us to build a harmonious society.

How locals and foreigners should treat one another

Both locals and foreigners should make an effort to get to know each other and build cordial relationships in the community.

Both foreigners and locals must respect each other and make an effort to build a community.

Both locals and foreigners should make a sincere initiative to reach out to the community with the intent to live harmoniously and peacefully with one another.

Both locals and foreigners should make an effort to know each other and to build tolerance and understanding.

All locals and foreigners should make efforts to get to know one another and establish understanding, tolerance, and acceptance within the community.

Everyday actions that build trust

I believe both sides need to come forward and engage, whether with a simple hello or an effort to help out.

It takes two hands to clap; when in Rome, do what the Romans do!

Common Ground Statements: Position

Mutual Respect and Social Cohesion are Important in Singapore

We believe that mutual respect and social cohesion are important as the basic foundations of how we live together as one society. This is like quid pro quo, cannot have one side make an effort and the other side not respond. One must give, and one must take.

Mutuality and reciprocity are important, knowing how to engage and be open to engaging so that both locals and foreigners feel that their efforts are recognized and that they share responsibility for harmony.

To build a cohesive society, mutuality is very important because it shows that everyone has a role in creating trust, reducing misunderstandings, and strengthening our sense of belonging.

Simple Everyday Gestures

We believe both sides need to come forward and engage one another. For example, a greeting or offering assistance when someone looks lost or needs support. It doesn't prescribe a tremendous amount of effort, just simple gestures that fit naturally into daily life and are realistic for most people. Simple gestures usually start friendships, and, over time, these small moments can grow into trust, cooperation, and stronger community ties. It's a low bar, and everyone, local or foreign, can play a part.

Shared Responsibility Between Government and Community

We believe that both the Government and residents share responsibility for making integration work. The Government can set policies, create platforms, and act as a leader to support integration in the local community. Residents, both locals and foreigners, bring these policies to life through their everyday choices and interactions.

Integration is a collaborative effort between the Government, foreigners, and locals.

Policy alone cannot create trust and ground up goodwill alone cannot address structural issues. When each party plays its part, Singapore can remain open and cohesive at the same time.

Everyday Conduct: Respect, Mindfulness and Engagement

We believe that everyday behaviour matters for how well people live together. Residents should be at least cordial and mindful of one another to maintain good relationships in a diverse society. This includes being aware of how words and actions affect others and avoiding behaviour that disrespects local norms or dismisses other cultures.

Both locals and foreigners should make a conscious effort to engage, whether through small gestures, simple conversations, or helping one another in practical ways. These sincere efforts build tolerance, understanding, and a sense of community over time, without placing unrealistic demands on people to form deep relationships immediately.

Fairness, Equity and Not Taking Singapore for Granted

We believe that expectations must feel fair across all groups. It is always about equity and about being fair in what we ask of locals and foreigners. Locals should not bear

all the responsibility for adapting or reaching out, and foreigners should recognize that residency here is a privilege that carries responsibilities.

Foreigners have value and contribute to Singapore, but they should not take their residency for granted. When everyone understands that rights come with obligations, and when expectations are applied consistently, it strengthens trust in the system and support for continued openness.

Social Cohesion and Harmony as The End Goal

We believe that mutual respect and social cohesion are important because harmony is the outcome that holds everything together. All residents should keep an open mind, as long as something is not unlawful or disrespectful, so that harmonious relations can grow.

Social cohesion requires effort from more than one side. It takes two hands to clap in building a harmonious society. When residents practice openness, fairness, and shared responsibility in daily life, Singapore can remain a safe and united home for people of different backgrounds.

Near Consensus

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
Both locals and foreigners should make a conscious effort to know each other and build tolerance and understanding.	23	1
Both locals and foreigners should make conscious and sincere efforts to get to know one another and establish understanding, tolerance and acceptance within the community.	23	1
I believe all residents should make efforts in learning and accepting each other in the country.	22	2
All residents should keep an open mind, unless it's unlawful and disrespectful, to build harmonious relations in the country.	22	2
I believe in Singapore everybody needs to be respectful in order to maintain a cordial relationship.	22	2

More events focused on local foreigner integration can be organised for both locals and foreigners to build relationships.	22	2
In Singapore, we believe it takes strong collaboration between locals, foreigners and Government to make integration work.	22	2
In Singapore, we believe foreigners have value and should not take their residence for granted.	21	3
Even though I wasn't born here, Singapore is my home. There is no place like home.	20	4

We recognize that some areas of discussion on integration and living together remain sensitive and do not yet reach common ground. These no-go areas reveal deeper tensions about belonging, responsibility, and fairness that simple statements cannot easily resolve.

First, there are differing views on whether Singapore is “home for everyone.” Some of us, including those not born here, strongly feel that “Singapore is my home” and that birthplace should not be the deciding factor. Others still see birthplace as significant and feel that where one is born continues to matter when thinking about identity and attachment. This tension shows that ideas of belonging sit on a spectrum, rather than a single shared position.

Second, there is no full agreement on how much integration should rely on the Government versus the community. Some of us believe the Government should take a clear lead as initiator, for example, through agencies organizing more events focused on local-foreigner integration. Others prefer that integration efforts do not depend too heavily on Government and feel that communities themselves should take more ownership. While many accept that “both government and residents can do this,” they still differ on where to place the primary responsibility.

Third, residents share the view that respect, reciprocity, and open-mindedness are important, but they cannot fully agree on the level of expectation. Some find “respect” or “everybody” too strong as blanket requirements and prefer more modest expectations such as being mindful or “live and let live,” especially when people are tired or under stress. There are also differing views on whether statements about open-mindedness and lawful limits add value or simply restate what is already understood. Some of us want clearer calls for concrete gestures, while others worry that such expectations feel burdensome.

Fourth, harmony as a shared effort remains an aspiration, yet residents disagree on how much effort is realistic. Many support the idea that “it takes two hands to clap” and that both locals and foreigners should make an effort to reach out. At the same time, there is discomfort with words like “conscious” and “sincere,” which some feel set the bar too high. Similarly, while there is a belief that “all residents have value and should not take their residency for granted,” some of us question whether it is fair to assume foreigners do not already appreciate their place in Singapore, pointing out that many are in fact humble and grateful.

Finally, the discussions highlighted that an important group is missing from the room. We noted that jobless or struggling Singaporeans who feel they have been replaced by foreigners may hold much stronger views about the foreigner-local divide. Many of those most affected may not have the time, resources or opportunity to attend such conversations. Without their voices, the picture of public sentiment is incomplete. To understand the full range of views, future dialogues will need to find ways to include this sidelined group, so that policies and community efforts can respond more fully to their experiences and concerns.

No Go

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
I believe in Singapore our government can act as a leader to step in to help integrate local community to create a common ground with activities and events.	8	10

We recognize that there are boundaries that the group could not cross without losing important differences in views. These “no-go” areas do not mean the ideas are unimportant. They show where expectations about identity, responsibility, and effort remain too contested to be called common ground.

The boundary lay in how much responsibility to place on the Government versus residents. While many agreed that both government and residents can do this and that integration doesn’t have to be only the government, others still wanted a clear initiator such as the People’s Association or similar bodies to lead events focused on local-foreigner integration. We experimented with formulations like ‘locals, foreigners, and/or the government’ and explicitly discussed adding “and / or,” yet they ultimately concluded that this could not be settled as a shared statement. It was better framed as a request or recommendation, not as common ground.

What became clearer?

Taken together, these near consensus and no-go areas reflect a degree of honesty in the discussion. We were willing to acknowledge where views diverged, to note the different perspectives, and to state clearly when a proposal was “not common ground; it’s a request.” Rather than paper over disagreement, they chose to mark these boundaries so that future conversations and policies can address them more directly.

Statement 2

Jobs

We agreed with the intention behind this statement, which recognises both the value of foreign professionals and the need to protect Singaporeans' sense of security and opportunity in their own labour market. At the same time, the discussions surfaced tensions around what "preferential access" means in practice and how it interacts with meritocracy.

This statement is further dissected into these 3 key discussion points:

1. Singapore's narrative on the emphasis and reliance on foreign professionals for our economic growth.
2. The meaning of preferential access to jobs:
 - a. Our thoughts on the effectiveness of what already exists: jobs available should be visible to Singaporeans first, which translates to Singaporeans being considered first for jobs (i.e., jobs posted for 2 weeks first on Careers Future SG, which is only accessible to Singaporeans)
 - b. Our need for clarification on whether preferential access includes preferential hiring of Singaporeans.
3. Our thoughts on preferential treatment of Singaporeans for career progressions.

Key Points from the Initial Dissection

Narrative about Foreign Professionals

We examined whether the current public narrative over-emphasises reliance on foreign professionals, in ways that can feel unsettling for Singaporeans who are already here and working hard. Some questioned framings that imply the economy would falter without foreign professionals. Are Singaporeans themselves not contributing to the country's economic growth?

Preferential Access and Visibility

There was broad interest in how far current safeguards, such as job postings on Careers Future SG for Singaporeans first, actually work on the ground. "Preferential access" was often interpreted first as priority visibility to jobs, rather than a guarantee of hiring.

Preferential Hiring and Progression

We sought clarity on whether preferential access extends to explicit preferential hiring and career progression. This raised important questions about how to balance merit, cost considerations and national obligations in a way that feels fair to all parties.

Common Ground

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion
Fair hiring and opportunities for Singaporeans
Foreign professionals may be hired but Singaporeans would be considered first for jobs. And best person for career progression.
Singaporeans must be given preferential treatment only if and only when they meet the required skillset or competencies for hiring.
Strong safeguards and Enforcement
Check, balance and strong prosecution as mandated by the government must be in place on companies with respect to hiring practices.
Working together with foreigner professionals
Singaporeans have the strength and adaptability to foster working relationships with the foreign professionals to contribute to Singapore's economic growth.

Common Ground Statements Themes

Fair Hiring Anchored in Merit

We agreed that hiring and progression should be grounded in the idea of choosing the best person for the job, regardless of nationality, while also recognising that Singaporeans should be considered first when they meet the required skillsets and competencies. Preferential treatment is therefore conditional.

Safeguards and Enforcement

There was strong support for checks, balances and meaningful enforcement against unfair hiring practices. We wanted clear signals that the government would act decisively where companies discriminate against Singaporeans or misuse the system.

Working Side by Side with Foreign Professionals

We recognised that Singaporeans can and do work productively with foreign professionals, and that such collaboration contributes to economic growth. Foreign professionals are not framed purely as competitors, but as colleagues whose presence can strengthen teams and sectors, as long as locals are not sidelined.

Key Takeaways: Reasons Why It Worked for the Group

- **Singaporeans should have priority visibility to jobs.** Even among non-Singaporeans, there was a consensus that it is sensible to have practices that help to ensure a high employment rate among locals, and giving priority to Singaporeans in job visibility is one such practice.
- **“Best person for the job” when it comes to hiring and career progression.** This person refers to both Singaporeans and foreigners. The “best person for the job” mentality empowers companies and hiring managers to select and groom their talent in ways they believe will best help them achieve their organisational goals or profitability, ultimately benefiting Singapore’s economic growth as a whole.

To what extent do you think these common ground statements are useful for guiding foreign-local relationships?

- If there were more awareness among all residents that foreigners believe Singaporeans should have priority visibility to jobs. Employers should be reminded that they need to follow the hiring guidelines by the Ministry Of Manpower (MOM). This will reassure Singaporeans that they are not invisible in their own market, while still allowing employers to select from foreign candidates where needed.
- Both locals and foreigners can support a system where the best person is selected on merit, as long as Singaporeans are not locked out from seeing or accessing opportunities in the first place.
- The notion that foreigners themselves may support priority visibility for Singaporeans can help reduce unnecessary tension. At the same time, employers need regular reminders that hiring guidelines by MOM are not optional, and that transparency and fairness are part of Singapore’s broader social compact.

Near Consensus

Certain nuances in the structure of a statement did not sit well with a few of us.

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
Fair hiring and opportunities for Singaporeans		

Necessary measures are taken to ensure Singaporeans get preferential treatment.	21	3
Foreign professionals do contribute to Singapore's economic growth, but preferential treatment should be given to Singaporeans, all things being equal, whenever possible then Singaporeans should be hired and promoted.	22	2
Merit and performance for career progression		
Regarding career progression, merit and job performance should be prioritised regardless of residential status.	22	2
With all things and circumstances being equal, both locals and foreigners should bring to the table performance value and meaningful contributions to be able to enjoy job security and career progression.	23	1
Checks, balances and transparency in hiring		
MOM must be transparent in their investigation of any reports of hiring infringement or wrongful sacking or retrenchment practices.	22	2
Role of foreign professionals and skills transfer		
I believe that foreign professionals add to GDP growth but we need to think about broader measures of growth.	22	2
Meritorious foreign professionals augment Singapore's economic growth. Locals should have priority in access to jobs and career advancements based on merit.	21	3

Why were these statements close to Common Ground?

Preferential Treatment with Conditions

Many of us could accept statements that Singaporeans receive preferential treatment, as long as this is explicitly tied to meeting required competencies and framed within a merit-based system. The discomfort arose when the wording seemed too absolute or ambiguous about what "preferential" means.

Equal Abilities and Progression

There was strong support for the idea that career progression should depend primarily on merit and job performance, regardless of residential status. Where all things are

equal, some we felt it is reasonable for locals to have an edge in access to jobs and advancement, while others worried this might dilute meritocracy if applied too mechanically.

Transparency and Trust

Statements about MOM needing to be transparent in investigations resonated widely. We wanted to see that reports of hiring infringement, wrongful sacking or unfair retrenchment are taken seriously and communicated clearly. However, it was also necessary that employers apply the guidelines so that these become normalised in Singapore, rather than solely relying on government enforcement.

Contribution Beyond GDP and Skills Transfer

We agreed that foreign professionals contribute to GDP, yet some wanted a broader view of growth that includes social cohesion, job quality and skills transfer to locals. There were also sentiments among us that all residents contribute to economic growth, and there is no need for an emphasis of only foreign professionals contributing to economic growth.

The idea of Employment Pass holders helping to train and upskill Singaporeans gained partial support, although details around responsibilities and expectations remained contested. While some of us supported the idea that the role of the EP was to transfer skills, so that a Singaporean can eventually take over the role, others in the group could not find consensus on this. Some foreigners are here for the long haul and see Singapore as an eventual home.

Tensions Underneath the Near Consensus

Overstating Foreign Dependence

We pushed back against narratives that suggest Singapore's economy would collapse without foreign professionals. Such narratives can unintentionally diminish the contributions of Singaporeans and heighten insecurity.

Language of "Priority" and "Preferential"

Words like "priority" and "preferential" are attractive because they signal protection for locals, yet they sit uneasily next to a strong attachment to meritocracy. We tried to square this circle by focusing on priority visibility rather than guaranteed outcomes.

Lived Experience of Being Undercut

Stories of being replaced or undercut by foreign hires who are perceived as cheaper, even when better qualified, created emotional pressure behind the debate. These

experiences influenced how we heard phrases like “best person for the job,” especially when salary differences were significant.

Implementation Doubts

We expressed doubts about whether existing rules on priority visibility are consistently applied in practice. Concerns included hidden biases in HR processes, opaque decisions by hiring managers, and a lack of clarity on enforcement.

No Go

There are clear boundaries for this topic.

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
Singaporeans sometimes can't compete with Foreign Professionals because of price but we need to think harder about how to create value beyond arbitrage.	18	6
To locals who call Singapore home, we must continuously progress as both an individual and as a nation to further 'cement' our job security and rise up to expats coming in with added value due to their tenacity to relocate and contribute aggressively to the growing workforce.	16	8
With our existing policies in place, while foreign professionals contribute to Singapore's economic growth, Singaporean job candidates should still be considered with priority if their qualifications are of the same or similar level as a foreign candidate for the same job. Career progression must be based solely on individual performance, and not on demographics, while investing in the career development of Singaporeans with the aim of localising the job position.	16	8
We should move towards building a framework whereby skills and training of Singaporeans by E Pass holders are in place and the E pass holders should upskill to move to higher roles.	14	10
Foreign professionals must train locals to take over and manage out foreign professionals.	14	10
Foreign professionals contribute to Singapore's economic growth, but Singaporeans must still be given preferential access to jobs and career developments if abilities and attitudes are equal. To address cost differential: active steps must be taken to harden Singaporeans	12	12

and develop a Swiss attitude to cost/price approach to goods and services.		
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Why did these statements become “No Go”?

Skills transfer and exit expectations

Statements that implied foreign professionals must train locals and then be “managed out” or exited after a period were especially divisive. We worried that such framing would discourage high quality talent from coming or create a transactional mindset where foreign professionals feel unwelcome and less invested.

Priority at equal or similar qualifications

Statements that appeared to guarantee priority for locals whenever qualifications are equal or similar, while intuitively attractive, raised technical and fairness concerns. We questioned how “similar” would be assessed and worried that such formulations might be perceived as rigid or discriminatory.

Role of government versus ground-up action

Some of us were uncomfortable with statements that placed too much expectation on the government to lead integration through activities and events, while others still wanted a strong government lead. This divide made it hard to fix a single shared position.

Key Takeaways:

There are differing views on the role of how foreign professionals could help Singapore meet these job demands of the evolving economy.

Context: Foreign professionals may be brought into Singapore due to the current shortage of skilled local professionals to meet certain job demands. This includes division on:

- **Whether foreign talents should be responsible for helping upskill or skill-transfer to Singaporeans.** Some believe that training should be provided by organisations separately or conducted in schools.
- **Suggestions that foreign professionals would train Singaporeans, then be exited out of the job role or country after a specific period of time.** Points were also raised that this would impact the kind of professionals we attract, and the type of mindset they would have when working in Singapore, if this were the case. For example, they may not be as invested in the job, country and may not want to

spend their money as much here in Singapore, knowing there's a clear deadline for them to leave the country.

Context: Perception that it gets more challenging for Singaporeans when they are competing for jobs against foreigners. There are differing views on Singaporeans needing to work harder to ensure their own job security. This includes division on:

- Singaporeans needing to “harden” or “rise up” to foreign professionals' aggressive contribution. (e.g., working longer hours, tenacity to relocate, willing to take a lower pay)
- The sentiment that Singaporeans cannot compete with foreign professionals.

What Became Clearer?

Why Foreign Professionals are Here

We accepted that foreign professionals often fill gaps where there is a shortage of skilled locals. However, they differed on how far foreign professionals should be expected to transfer skills, and whether they should eventually step aside for Singaporeans. Concerns arose that rigid expectations of exit would reduce commitment and spending by foreigners in Singapore. Furthermore, it raises concerns whether foreigners ‘stepping aside’ would undermine the principle of meritocracy we discussed regarding career progression.

Burden On Singaporeans Versus System Design

There was a visible tension between urging Singaporeans to “work harder,” or “rise up,” and recognising structural factors such as salary and employer preferences. Some felt individual effort is essential for job security. Others worried that focusing too much on personal toughness lets organisations and systems avoid necessary reforms.

Emotional Weight of Competition

The perception that Singaporeans cannot compete with foreign professionals on price, working hours or mobility coloured much of the discussion. These perceptions, whether fully accurate or not, influence how people interpret messages about openness, competitiveness and foreign talent.

Incomplete Picture of Those Most Affected

The reflections hinted that some of the Singaporeans who feel most displaced or undercut may not be in the room. Understanding the experiences of jobless or struggling locals who feel replaced by foreign professionals would be crucial to building more durable common ground.

Overall, the discussions showed that residents want a labour system where:

- Foreign professionals can contribute meaningfully to Singapore's growth,
- Singaporeans are also acknowledged for their contribution to Singapore's growth.
- Singaporeans have clear priority visibility and fair chances at access to jobs and progression.
- Merit and performance are retained as key guiding principles, while safeguards, transparency and communication keep trust in the labour market intact.

Statement 3

Education

We agreed with the intention behind this statement, which is to safeguard opportunities for Singaporeans while preserving meritocratic standards.

At the same time, the discussions surfaced several sources of discomfort and tension:

First, some of us worried that “priority” might sound like an entitlement that weakens meritocracy if interpreted too broadly. They preferred an understanding of priority that still requires all applicants, regardless of citizenship, to meet clear and consistent academic thresholds.

Second, there were different views on how far this principle should extend across the entire education system. Some of us felt that priority should focus primarily on universities, since primary and secondary schools already favour Singaporeans in practice and policy.

Third, the idea of prioritising Singaporeans relative to equally or nearly equally qualified foreign candidates raised concerns about how to reconcile fairness, competition, and national responsibility in a precise and workable way.

The group therefore moved towards a framing in which:

- Meritocracy remains the organising principle for admissions.
- Within the pool of applicants who meet the bar, local institutions recognise a duty to ensure strong and sufficient access for Singaporeans, especially in publicly funded places and in higher education.

Common Ground

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion
Opportunities for every Singapore child
I believe every Singaporean child should be given ample opportunities to excel.
Maintain meritocracy, but ensure Singaporeans have access and pathways
Singaporeans should be given priority, within their abilities, local schools and universities, even as we uphold the principle of Singapore-style meritocracy with instruments of means testing.
While upholding meritocracy, our local education institutions will and should continue to ensure strong opportunities for Singaporeans while remaining open and welcoming to global talent that enrich our academic community.

In line with our meritocratic principles, our education institutes strive to provide accessible pathways for Singaporeans, while valuing the diversity and perspectives brought by international students.

Common Ground Themes

Mindset And Values for Education and Fairness

We affirmed that every Singapore child should have ample opportunities to excel. Priority for Singaporeans was framed as part of a broader social compact in which publicly funded institutions carry a special responsibility to citizens, while still maintaining high standards.

Meritocracy With Support and Safeguards

The references to “Singapore-style meritocracy” and “means testing” reflect a shared belief that meritocracy should be fair and inclusive, not purely exam based. Tools such as financial assistance and targeted support help ensure that deserving Singaporeans, regardless of background, can access local institutions.

Balancing Local Priority and Global Openness

There was broad acceptance that local institutions should remain open and welcoming to global talent that enriches the academic community. At the same time, we wanted confidence that this openness does not come at the expense of Singaporeans’ access to places, especially in universities.

Pathways and Diversity

The statements on accessible pathways and valuing the perspectives of international students show that we did not see this as a zero-sum debate. Diversity and exposure to global peers are seen as strengths, as long as core opportunities for Singaporeans remain protected.

Position

There was a clear position among us that Singaporeans should be given priority in admission to local educational institutions, as long as they meet the admission requirements.

Several statements from the Consensus Conference support this sentiment:

- “All Singaporeans should have access to deserving local institutions including universities.”
- “As long as the student is qualified, priority should be given to the Singaporeans when applying for local institutions, including universities.”

- “Singaporeans should be given a local educational institution bracket in each of the primary schools.”
- “Priority should be given to Singaporeans when applying for local institutions, including universities.”

The group reached common ground likely because they explicitly gave priority to Singaporeans in local educational institutions, especially at universities, since local primary and secondary schools already prioritise Singaporeans for admission.

If the statements are representative of the overall opinion of Singapore citizens, foreigners should keep in mind that Singaporeans strongly support giving first priority to local students in admission to local educational institutions. As a result, foreign candidates to local schools should not expect to be considered on par with local candidates with the same or similar application strength.

Common Ground Statements: Position

The position that emerged can be summarised as follows:

- Priority for Singaporeans is conditional on meeting admission criteria and does not override minimum standards.
- Within the qualified pool, local students should enjoy a clearer and more secure pathway into local institutions, especially universities.
- Singaporeans reflect concern about sustaining long term educational opportunities because there is a direct translation to job opportunities for Singapore citizens.

Foreign applicants, in this understanding, are still welcome and valued, particularly when they bring strong academic records and contribute to Singapore's future.

However, they should not assume a fully equal footing with citizens in publicly funded educational institutes that are ultimately accountable to Singaporean taxpayers.

Near Consensus

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
If Singaporeans are just as qualified (for public university), they should come first.		
Singaporeans should be given priority at local education institutions, including universities when their qualifications are equal to that of PRs and foreigners in terms of merit.	23	1

All things being equal, Singapore citizens must be given priority to institutes of higher learning for undergraduate education.	23	1
As long as the student qualifies, priority should be given to Singaporeans for entry to local education institutions, including universities.	23	1
Singaporeans should be given priority at local education institutions, including universities if admission requirements are met. However if so, universities must be given leeway to include a small percentage of foreigners for diversity, and not just a saturation of local talent.	22	2
Keep a capped group of foreign students for diversity and talent, with safeguards.		
All Singaporeans should have access and priority to deserving local institutions including universities, with additional smaller pool (that is capped) for meritorious foreign talent (without any subsidy).	22	2

These discussions revealed areas that were close to, but not fully at, common ground:

Scope of Priority

Many of us accepted priority for Singaporeans at universities, where places are limited and stakes are high. Views were more varied on whether any additional priority beyond existing policy is needed at primary and secondary levels, since local students already receive strong preference there.

Nature of "Equal Qualification"

Some of us found it unrealistic to compare equally qualified local and foreign candidates in a strict sense, given the multiple dimensions of an application. Others worried that any explicit statement about giving preference to a local candidate over a foreign candidate with similar strength might be viewed as undermining meritocracy, even if the intention is to recognise citizenship obligations.

Reservations about Caps and Quotas

Proposals that sounded like capped pools for meritorious foreign students in local schools attracted resistance. We associated such caps with rigid quota systems and felt this would be too blunt an instrument, potentially at odds with the spirit of meritocracy and institutional flexibility.

What became clearer?

During the discussion, it became clearer that although Singaporeans want to uphold meritocracy, they still feel strongly about prioritizing local students for admission to local education institutions, especially in higher education. Many felt strongly that all candidates to local schools must meet the minimum admissions requirements, regardless of their citizenship, so that academic standards do not drop.

This reflects a layered position: we want both strong academic standards and a clear signal that citizens matter in the allocation of limited, publicly funded opportunities.

There were several clean no-go lines related to this statement, mostly related to funding. Some of us felt strongly that foreign students should not receive scholarships to attend local educational institutions, while others preferred that foreign students are offered only bonded scholarships or grants as financial support for their studies so that they are required to stay and work in Singapore after graduation and thus can contribute back to the country. It was also notable that many of the Singaporeans among us were not aware that Singapore Citizens made up a vast majority of undergraduate university students in government-funded institutions, until it was clarified by the IPS research team based on a Parliamentary Reply.

Several of us were also uncomfortable with setting percentages or quotas on foreign student admission or foreign students who are given scholarships.

Lastly, a significant number disagreed with reducing the difference between school fees for Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents (PRs). Some preferred for the current policy to stay unchanged, while others thought that PRs need to pay even higher fees but that there should be means testing for PRs who need financial assistance.

These lines showed where we were prepared to draw firmer boundaries, especially on issues of finance, obligations, and visible differentiation between citizens, PRs, and foreigners.

No Go

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
In Singapore I believe the education system should always prioritise Singaporeans and PRs and no more than 20% of the places should be offered to overseas students to help foster social cohesion and national identity. No more than 10% of overseas places should offer large scholarship.	19	5

I believe there can be tighter caps on local and private education providers to ensure students are here on merit.	18	6
Current policies are good. I would prefer the fee gap for PR to be lowered so as not to lose any talent due to financial reasons.	14	10

The “no go” areas here point to deeper questions about identity, distribution of opportunity, and the limits of policy intervention:

Quota for Foreign Students

Any suggestion that schools should reserve explicit quotas of opportunity for foreign students felt too much like taking places away from Singaporeans, especially at universities where places are closely linked to future employment prospects. However, this could be conflicted by some local universities’ interests in maintaining a global ranking.

Role of Private Educational Institutions

We did not share a common expectation for private education providers. Some were comfortable with private institutions exercising more autonomy because they do not rely on public funds. Others worried about social impact and called for stronger regulation, yet this did not reach consensus.

What became clearer?

Over the course of the conference, it became clear that some of us were operating under the assumption that there were many more foreign students in Singapore’s publicly funded universities than there actually are at the undergraduate-level. Even though the research team provided the information, this was not easily accessible via the Ministry of Education’s website.

It also became evident that Singaporeans want to keep a clear and significant divide between local school fees for locals and those for PRs and foreigners, since local schools are funded by taxpayers. For example, the school fees in primary, secondary schools and the automatic application of the tuition grant for Singaporean in publicly funded universities.

Overall, Singaporeans would like to maintain current policies that give priority admission to Singaporean students at local schools.

Reflections

The conversations revealed that perceptions of the foreign student presence are often larger than the reality. When we realised that the actual proportion of foreign students is about half of what some had assumed, it helped explain why concerns about crowding out and competition can feel sharper than the data suggests.

At the same time, the insistence on clear fee differentials and priority admission for citizens highlighted an underlying expectation: **Singaporeans want reassurance that their contributions as taxpayers and citizens are recognised in concrete ways.** Foreign students and PRs are seen as important contributors, but their access and support should reflect a different relationship to the system.

The divide is therefore not simply between “locals” and “foreigners,” but between different understandings of fairness. For many of us, fairness means high academic standards for all, strong structural safeguards for citizens, and calibrated openness to foreign students that does not erode opportunities for Singaporeans.

Statement 4

Openness & Multiculturalism

The statement focuses on 4 important aspects:

1. Reflects Singapore's openness and global perspective.
2. Implies that Singapore was founded as a diverse and multiracial society.
3. Emphasises being receptive to global talent, ideas, and cultural contributions.
4. Suggests assurance in maintaining national identity and local culture.

Common Ground

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion

Singapore residents should accept and understand people of different nationalities without losing who we are, and foreigners must respect the host country.

There was only one common ground statement that was arrived at. This single statement captures the minimum shared position:

- Locals accept and try to understand people of different nationalities.
- Foreigners respect the host country's norms and do not treat Singapore as a blank slate.
- "Without losing who we are" signals that openness has limits and that identity must feel secure, not fragile.

Why was this statement acceptable?

It affirms reciprocity

Singaporeans are not the only ones asked to adapt. Foreigners also carry responsibility to respect local norms and not impose their own values casually.

It matches lived experience

Residents already live in a multicultural, globally connected city. The statement does not introduce a new ideal. It describes what many already experience or aspire to.

It focuses on harmony, not blame

The language is calm rather than accusatory. That made it easier for us with different residency status to find common ground without feeling attacked or defensive.

To what extent do you think these common ground statements are useful for guiding foreign-local relationships?

It lays the foundation for how acceptance and reciprocity can aid in guiding the foreign-

local relationship. It sets clear and simple principles.

- Openness from locals. SG residents accept diversity in nationality and culture as part of their shared reality.
- Respect from Foreigners. Foreigners recognise that they join an existing society with its own norms, and they act accordingly.

This dual responsibility minimises misunderstandings and reduces social friction. It

- Reduces misunderstandings over behaviours that clash with Singaporean expectations.
- Gives Singaporeans confidence that being open does not mean losing who they are.
- Gives foreigners clarity that respect for the host culture is compulsory, not optional.

This statement is a great start for reiterating shared values.

Near Consensus

There were 7 statements that almost reached common ground but was not adopted as it couldn't gather complete acceptance from all of us.

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
Singapore's multiculturalism helps welcome talent and investment while maintaining Singapore's status as a global hub without losing our identity.	20	2
Openness is valuable, but cohesion does not happen automatically – it needs intentional policies, integration support and shared norms.	20	2
People should be open-minded to individual behaviours instead of attributing their personality traits to their culture.	20	2
Singapore residents should be mindful (considerate) of each other's culture.	20	2
Singapore 's DNA is strongly woven on multiculturalism. Its diversity and inclusion welcomes the world, while upholding Singapore's traditions and values.	21	1
Singapore's openness to the world and the government's support for	21	1

multiculturalism and diversity make the country a welcoming destination to people of different nationalities.		
Singapore welcomes foreigners to add diversity to our multicultural population. Foreigners must be respectful of local values and culture and not impose their values or norms.	21	1

These statements almost made it because they:

- Affirm Singapore's existing openness and multicultural DNA.
- Highlight the need for respect from foreigners and mindfulness from residents.
- Recognise that integration requires effort, policies, and shared norms, not passive optimism.

They fell short mainly because some of us were uneasy with how much they emphasised openness without equally strong guarantees about protecting local norms or because they sounded too top down in tone.

What might have enabled common ground:

Assurances on Safeguarding Local Norms

We wanted stronger, clearer language that core Singaporean norms, values, and traditions will remain intact (e.g. reserving a seat using tissue paper), even as the country stays open. That assurance could have made some statements easier to accept.

Explicit Reciprocity

Whenever reciprocity and mutual respect were explicit, support increased. When statements sounded one sided, support dropped. Stronger framing that both locals and foreigners bear responsibility might have tipped more statements over the line.

Top-Down vs Ground Up

Some were wary of top-down multiculturalism where policies feel prescriptive or engineered. Greater emphasis on ground up interactions and organic acceptance might have softened this resistance.

Acknowledging Selective Openness

Explicitly recognising that openness varies by sector, skill level, and nationalities (e.g., work permits, industry needs) could have addressed concerns about being "open to the world.

Clarity on Safeguarding Local Norms

The consensus statement shows residents are resistant to changes to the local cultural norms and practices. Stronger emphasis that Singapore's core norms, values, and traditions would remain intact *even as we stay open* could have made more statements acceptable.

No Go

Despite finding common ground in the small group, these statements did not find common ground in the large group.

Residents' Statements from Small Group Discussion	Can Live with It	Cannot Live with It
Singapore government and residents welcome foreigners to contribute to the country and the cultural diversity while accepting some changes on our identity.	19	3
Singaporeans is a multicultural nation and we are learning to welcome all without fear or prejudice.	17	5
Singapore must remain open with evolving criteria to immigration to continue its economic growth.	16	6
I believe instituting shared values can be done to make openness and true integration (such as from primary school).	15	7
Culture and traditions are uniquely individual and associated to a family practice or values.	15	7
I'm okay to change and being changed. But on my terms. I may consider changing if mutually beneficial.	10	12

These statements were too contested to arrive at common ground, even if some small groups accepted them. They fell into the "no go" zone because they touched raw questions about identity, forced change, and the engineering of values.

What were clear lines of No-go for these statements?

- **Resistance to Forced Change:** Residents did not want to feel compelled to accept changes to local norms and practices from foreigners.
- **Organic Change:** We opined changes should come organically through acceptance and long-term interaction and deemed imposed ones unacceptable.
- **Clarity on what is acceptable:** There was no clarity on what is specifically

acceptable. Without clear boundaries, the group could not confidently agree to the statements.

- **Institutionalising Change:** Residents were wary of policies to engineer integration. It was seen as restrictive and prescriptive.

Why are these statements divisive?

- **Missing Reciprocity:** No reciprocity between SG residents and foreigners. Some statements implied SG residents must adapt or accommodate foreigners first without equal responsibility on the part of newcomers.
- **Clarity on what is acceptable:** Statements were often high-level or vague on the extent or type of cultural change considered acceptable. This ambiguity made it difficult to reach agreement.
- **Preconceived Biases:** There are preconceived ideas of behaviour and cultural values that inhibit further interaction.
- **Different Interpretations:** Few terms were understood differently by us, making it harder to reach full consensus on statements referencing them.

What became clearer for the full group?

- **Change from within:** Changes to identity must come from Singaporeans not imposed or dictated by foreigners. This was a key non-negotiable for most of us.
- **Resistance to Imposed Changes:** Most group members were not willing to accept cultural changes or local norms, that are imposed or pressured.
- **Culture Change for Economic Reasons:** We were particularly cautious about adapting cultural norms solely for economic reasons. Economic justification alone did not make imposed cultural change acceptable.

Reflections

The discussions highlighted careful balance Singapore residents strive for between openness and preserving local identity.

While there was common ground on respect and reciprocity, it was clear that residents are resistant to changes imposed by foreigners or driven solely on economic considerations.

Ambiguity in statements and high-level ideals without practical clarity also hindered full agreement.

Identity Change Must Feel Self-Determined

We insisted that meaningful shifts in identity must come from Singaporeans themselves. Foreign presence may influence, but not dictate, who Singaporeans become.

Economic Arguments are Not Enough

Residents did not accept that economic growth alone justifies cultural change. They were especially cautious about any suggestion that norms should bend simply because openness brings money or talent.

Clarity and Practicality Matter

High level ideals about openness and multiculturalism are easy to agree with in theory, but the group wanted more concrete clarity about what is actually acceptable in practice. Vague language weakened support.

Conditions for Effective Multiculturalism

The discussions suggest that sustainable multiculturalism rests on:

- Reciprocity between locals and foreigners.
- Gradual, organic change rather than forced shifts.
- Clear boundaries that protect core norms and identity.
- Policies that support integration without feeling like social engineering.

Integration Requires an Ongoing, Coordinated Effort

Integration is a long-term effort. Just as Singapore puts in steady work to manage race and religion carefully, it is equally important that integration between locals and foreigners receives planned, sustained effort from different groups in society. Platforms like these are a good start, but this work needs to continue over time.

In summary, Singaporeans are a welcoming people. However, residents want a Singapore that stays open to the world and to different nationalities, while keeping a firm grip on “who we are”, how change happens, and the pace of change over time; effective multiculturalism and integration depend on reciprocity, gradual acceptance, and distinct boundaries that enable locals to uphold their customs and beliefs while integrating well with new-comers.

Community Project

Triad Trails / Food Heritage Trails

Overview and Purpose

As a practical and concrete follow-up to the Consensus Conference, we co-developed a community project, “Triad Trails / Food Heritage Trails.” The community project applies the group’s shared positions on cordial relationships, mutual respect, realistic expectations and shared responsibility for local-foreign integration and anchors these ideas in Changi Simei and East Coast GRC.

Project Design and Participation

The project is an event-based heritage trail to be held on a weekend after Chinese New Year 2026, from 10 am to 4 pm. Residents will gather at common pick-up points in Changi Simei and East Coast GRC and travel together to Chinatown and Geylang. These sites offer rich stories about Singapore’s history, informal economies and food culture, and provide a setting where residents can learn together about local norms and practices.

The trail will involve about 30 residents. Twenty participants will be recruited: 10 local and 10 foreign participants living in Changi Simei and East Coast GRC. A 10-member workgroup from the Consensus Conference participants will design and run the project.

Roles and Modes of Interaction

The design reflects key themes from the Consensus Conference. Ex-offenders will serve as tour guides and share their lived experiences along the route, giving residents direct exposure to perspectives that are usually less visible in public discourse. Community volunteers, rather than professional facilitators, will take on roles as food researchers, resource persons, and activity leads. This distributes ownership and shows how integration can sit in everyday community structures. The project sets a realistic bar for interaction by emphasising shared experiences, informal conversations and simple gestures such as greeting, listening and offering help during the trail.

Intended Outcomes and Next Steps

The intended outcomes are to increase interaction and engagement between locals and foreigners in Changi Simei and East Coast GRC, deepen understanding of the history behind local cultural practices, and strengthen integration through reciprocity.

If the pilot proves successful, the workgroup plans to run the trail quarterly and explore collaborations to foster local-foreign integration with educational institutions and corporate partners through CSR programmes. In this way, “Triad Trails / Food

Heritage Trails" serves as both a specific programme and a prototype for community-driven initiatives that operationalise the shared positions of the Consensus Conference.

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Prepared by Consensus Conference Participants

Mohammad Zuhair Azhar

Diyana Syafiqah

Brendan De Souza

Vignesh Kuppusamy

David Foo

Rajeshwaran Vivin

Zhana Nikolaeva Sandeva

Wan Hill Kuan

Norman Chew

Kim Chan

Ben Chong

Jon Veel

Jenny Chan

Indravathy Ramanathan

Atasi Sarkar

Su Wen Koh

Sarah Wee

Cellin Tham

Annie Pereira

Ng Tan Wei

Soumya Ranjan Singh

Tan Seng Chong

Andrew Wong

John Lim

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