

200,000 S'poreans living abroad

27% rise in number of citizens overseas since 2003, with Australia the top draw

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THE number of Singaporeans living abroad has risen sharply over the past decade, with Australia, Britain, the United States and China being their main destinations.

There were 200,000 citizens overseas as of June - a 27 per cent increase from 157,100 in 2003.

Most are between 20 and 54 years old, with slightly more women than men, stated the Population in Brief 2012 report published by the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) last month.

The figures refer to citizens with a registered foreign address or those who have been away for a cumulative period of at least six months in the past year.

The report did not reveal other details, and the NPTD told The Sunday Times that it did not have information on what these Singaporeans were doing overseas.

Immigration expert Leong Chan Hoong said the number of overseas Singaporeans was "quite significant and sizeable", especially for a small country like Singapore. They comprised 6.1 per cent of the 3.29 million citizens living in Singapore as of June.

"It's good for Singaporeans to get experience overseas, but the fear is that this top talent in their prime may never come back," said the Institute of Policy Studies research fellow.

He said the trend is more challenging given the rapidly ageing population, baby shortage and the difficulty in finding talent - from business to social services to politics - to "run Singapore".

Economists interviewed said Singapore's brain drain is more a social and political problem, rather than an economic one, as the outflow of local expertise is matched by an inflow of foreigners, so the country is not short of skilled manpower.

Singapore's leaders have signalled concern about the number of citizens abroad for some time. In 2008, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong revealed that about one-quarter of top A-level students who go overseas to study or work do not return. This reduces the talent pool for political renewal, he said.

Through the Overseas Singaporean Unit set up in 2006, the Government has engaged overseas citizens to keep them connected.

Visiting New Zealand last Sunday, Mr Lee met Singaporeans living in Auckland and stressed the importance of taking into account the concerns of citizens abroad and keeping them updated about developments back home.

Two days later, he told Singaporeans living in Melbourne: "We hope that wherever you may go, you remember that you're Singaporean, and your friends and family are at home. And one day, hopefully before too long, you come back to Singapore."

The countries with the biggest number of Singaporeans are Australia (with about 50,000), Britain (about 40,000) and the US (about 27,000). China is catching up with about 20,000 Singaporeans, The Sunday Times understands.

Recruitment experts say Singaporean professionals are sought after in China as they are bilingual and highly skilled. They are employed in middle to senior management positions in sectors such as property development, financial services and manufacturing.

Singaporeans are also valued in emerging markets such as in the Middle East, Vietnam and Indonesia, in a wide range of industries.

Most of those abroad are working, studying or settled there with their foreign spouses. Singaporeans working abroad told The Sunday Times that aside from job prospects, they were also drawn by the better quality of life.

Engineer Jumadi Husani, 39, a Nanyang Technological University graduate, was head-hunted to work in Dubai four years ago for triple his Singapore pay. With globalisation, he said, "the world is our playing field". He said life in Dubai is less stressful - he works from 7.30am to 4pm on most days, has more time for his wife and three children, and plays golf almost every day.

Engineer Sherryn Oh, 33, went to work in London seven years ago for a change of environment and met British manager Lee Russell, 34, at a party. They are now married with a nine-month-old daughter, and live in Surrey.

A British permanent resident, Madam Oh said the more relaxed culture and flexi-work arrangements there are a big plus. "In Singapore, you are expected to work hard and work late. Here, people work hard but also play hard. Family life is a priority and bosses respect your personal time," she said.

Dr Leong of the IPS expects more Singaporeans to head for work stints abroad. He polled about 2,000 Singaporeans aged 19 to 30 on their attitudes to emigration and more than half wanted to work abroad, most for not more than five years.

Besides the usual reasons of career development and financial rewards, younger people want to see the world beyond the little red dot, he said.

Some may be like Mr Jumadi, who plans to return one day as "Singapore is still home". But others, like dietitian Gerard Wong, 35, may sink their roots elsewhere.

Based in Darwin for the past six years, the bachelor loves being able to play tennis or bike after knocking off at "4.30pm sharp" daily.

A graduate of Flinders University in South Australia, the Australian permanent resident said: "I can afford to buy a home and I do not feel like I'm living in debt, which is a good feeling. Going back to Singapore would mean taking a pay cut, longer working hours and less work-life balance."