

Finding a new narrative Move away from ageing population angle

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APART from recent moves to ease the strain on transport and housing, more measures, some radical even, are needed to deal with the thorny topic of integration.

One academic suggests moving away from the oft-cited argument by the Government - that immigrants are necessary to top up an ageing population and abysmal birth rates.

Others moot a monetary bonus for citizens that is linked to the number of immigrants currently in Singapore.

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, vice-chairman of the 2010 Reach Policy Study Workgroup on integration, says there is little persuasive impact in harping on the benefits of avoiding an ageing society as this is evident only in the distant future. The cost of a liberal immigration policy, however, is immediate and personal, with Singaporeans competing with foreigners for jobs and space daily.

The research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies suggests focusing on sharing with Singaporeans the anxieties of new citizens or immigrants - such as how their children cope with National Service or when they sit for major exams - similar to the worries faced by local-born citizens. "We need this new narrative because... we forget how vulnerable we all are, both immigrants and locals. In fact, we share so much more in common in negotiating day-to-day difficulties," he said.

The downside, however, is that this is based on sympathy and could trigger the opposite reaction of apathy, says Mr Norman Vasu.

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) assistant professor advocates more transparency on immigration.

"Who specifically is the nation taking in, and why, are questions that, if clear answers are provided for, will go a long way in assuring Singaporeans," he says.

Instituting a points system of application for new citizens, similar to Australia's, would also indicate what skills Singapore needs and how individuals managed to become citizens or permanent residents.

Mr Vasu, along with two colleagues, also suggested having an "immigration bonus" in a commentary published in this newspaper on Wednesday.

This would be given to only Singaporeans, and come from levies collected from Work Permit and S-Pass Holders, and possibly from the introduction of a one-off entry levy for Employment Pass Holders.

This bonus, they wrote, will serve as an "important signal" to Singaporeans of how their fortunes are intertwined with foreigners, as the amount will rise and fall in tandem with the number of foreigners allowed in.

Meanwhile, former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan wants to see more dialogue between immigrants and homegrown Singaporeans, where they can hear each other's frustrations and start honest discussions about integration.

Peaceful co-existence and tolerance of idiosyncrasies are more realistic targets in the short-term rather than exhortations to forge firm friendships, he believes.