

Helping foreigners fit in: 'Don't just focus on talents' Prof says: Integration efforts should cater to spouses, students and low-skilled workers too

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SINGAPORE needs to go beyond focusing only on foreign talent in its various efforts to integrate foreigners into the community here, said university don Brenda Yeoh yesterday.

Maids, low-skilled workers, students and spouses should be included as well in the group, not just the professionals and businessmen.

'For example, for foreign spouses, there are no support groups for those who don't speak mainstream languages,' said Professor Yeoh, who does research at the National University of Singapore on migration issues.

The swell in the number of foreigners in the Singapore population has made integration a key issue, and yesterday Prof Yeoh dwelt on it when she addressed the topic, *The New Politics Of Cultural Identity*.

Three speakers, including actress-director Beatrice Chia-Richmond, spoke on the topic at the Singapore Perspectives 2007 conference.

The annual meeting of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) discusses key trends and developments in Singapore politics and society.

Prof Yeoh, a geography don, said non-citizens formed around 10 per cent of the population in 1970. That worked out to about 200,000 people.

Latest figures, however, show it has jumped to 26 per cent or over one million non-Singaporeans.

But not all are treated with equal warmth.

One group she singled out for better treatment is the low-skilled foreign workers. Now, they are managed under a 'use and discard' policy, she said.

About 580,000 of them are here, working as domestic maids and construction workers. But national policies are aimed at stopping them from making Singapore a permanent home.

For instance, they cannot marry Singaporeans or permanent residents and cannot bring their families with them, said Prof Yeoh.

'These draconian policies are to ensure that foreign workers in our midst work on a use-and-discard policy, and don't remain in the social fabric,' she said.

Another issue she raised was whether schemes to retain foreign talent were working, or if they were using Singapore as a launch pad for going to other countries.

'Ironically, giving them permanent residency makes them more mobile to gain entry to other gateways,' she noted.

Sociology don Kwok Kian Woon also touched on the need to embrace foreigners and deal with the dilemmas and contradictions this might bring.

Their presence would inject fresh blood into Singapore's creative scene, something which would aid the continued development of a Singapore culture, said Associate Professor Kwok, whose expertise is in cultural policy and identity.

When asked by The Straits Times on the choice of the topic, IPS senior researcher Tan Tarn How said it was timely to think about cultural identity following the Government's recent declaration that it would continue to woo foreign talent while putting citizens first.

'Such a policy will lead to a transformation in the nature of Singapore society.

'One aspect is the question of identity: Who am I and who do we see the people who come here to work or study as being?'