

Integration 101: Here's how to build ties

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Get S'pore students and foreign peers to mix more to create a new mosaic

It may sound like an old cliché, but youths today hold the key to Singapore's future integration - or dissolution.

Much has been said about what Singaporeans and foreigners should do to accommodate and assimilate. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also sought to calm simmering resentment last month, signalling that Singapore would slow its immigrant intake.

But a stronger, non-government thrust might lie with the nation's youths. A straw poll of 100 youths aged 13 to 24 recently conducted for *The Straits Times'* youth magazine, *IN*, revealed some intriguing issues.

Younger youths - between 13 and 18 - tend not to consider themselves different from non-Singaporeans. They also see foreign schoolmates as beneficial to their studies, and want immigration rules eased or kept at their current status.

Their older counterparts, on the other hand, tend to draw a distinction between local and non-local, view foreigners as unwanted competition for grades, and want the immigration tap tightened.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, and Associate Professor Paulin Straughan, a Nominated Member of Parliament who teaches sociology at the National University of Singapore, both point out that competition for educational opportunities and jobs rises as youths grow older.

Because there is a lack of a permanent classroom arrangement at tertiary level, the effectiveness of institutional initiatives to promote integration is limited.

Finally, there's the numbers game.

According to the Ministry of Education, foreigners make up 20 per cent of undergraduates, against just 4 per cent at secondary school and junior college levels, and 8 per cent at the polytechnics.

But should we wait until our youths enrol in university to tame the flames of resentment? In a word: No.

Instead, education experts at all levels should double their integration efforts.

Prof Straughan suggested finding more local families to host foreign students, especially during school holidays when the hostels empty out, leaving lonely stragglers behind.

Why not extend this to junior college and secondary school levels too - or even assign every foreign student to a local family, and not just during the holidays?

There is nothing quite like eating and sleeping under one roof to foster understanding and strengthen ties.

On a student exchange to the United States two years ago, I learnt most about the American way of life and thinking from my American roommate. We learnt to accommodate each other's quirks and resolve disputes through compromise.

Such interaction, I believe, will warm foreigners to the Singaporean way of life, and get Singaporeans to see them as more than just a threat or faceless hordes.

Better than viewing The Other from afar - which is sadly the norm for my generation of 20-somethings.

On campus, the inevitable tends to happen. All it takes is an unpleasant episode - someone cutting queue, pushing and shoving on the bus, or loud chatter in the library - for us to point fingers and go: 'Those foreigners...'

Who bothers to actually talk to them, let alone try to understand them? Who cares if Singaporeans are equally capable of such ugly behaviour? It seems that not enough can be said of getting an early start when it comes to learning positive attitudes.

It cannot hurt to build up as much goodwill among Singaporeans and their foreign classmates - at as young an age as possible - when it could spell the difference between creating a new mosaic or having the pieces fall apart altogether