

S'pore a top choice for young and educated Population would jump 219% if people could migrate anywhere: Poll

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The Straits Times, 11 November 2010

Sitting within booming Asia yet armed with the creature comforts of a developed economy, Singapore is tops as a migration destination for the young and educated.

It is the only economy in developed Asia - which includes Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan - that would not suffer a brain drain if people around the world can migrate anywhere they want, according to a poll by research firm Gallup.

In fact, Singapore would have four times its current number of educated adults, defined as those with at least a bachelor's degree. Even greater would be the jump in the number of those aged between 15 and 29: It would rise six times - a silver lining for a rapidly ageing population.

These results emerge from the answers of 350,000 adults in 148 countries who were asked whether they, if given the opportunity, would like to move permanently to another country, and if so, where.

Overall, Singapore's population would burgeon by 219 per cent, from its current 5 million to 15 million, leapfrogging it to the top of Gallup's Potential Net Migration Index. The index is calculated by subtracting the number of people who want to move out of a country from those who want to move in. Singapore is followed by New Zealand, Canada and Switzerland.

But the results come with two caveats. One, it measures aspirations, not intentions. Two, Singapore's small population means the impact of migration shifts is magnified. For instance, one million people eyeing Singapore would make a huge difference to its population, compared with say, the population of 300 million in the United States.

The report did not give the absolute net number of people who would want to migrate into - or out of - each country.

But a comparison with countries of similar population sizes shows Singapore faring well. Hong Kong, with seven million people, would lose 28 per cent of its educated people and 5 per cent of its young people. Norway, with five million people, would see its educated group increase by just 15 per cent.

Research fellow Leong Chan Hoong of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), who studies migration patterns, posited that Singapore's good showing is due to its strategic location within Asia.

'Asia, being a dynamic region, is attracting young, talented people hungry for success. And Singapore - compared with Japan and South Korea - is known as a place where we speak English, is safe, and has a good education system.'

The results also debunk the conventional view that Singapore attracts families, while Hong Kong gets the young and single professionals. Dr Leong attributes it to branding strategies that market Singapore as a dynamic destination.

'With greater investment in arts and entertainment, from the Esplanade to the integrated resorts, and numerous food and cultural festivals, Singapore is now more vibrant with attractive lifestyle offerings to global talent.'

Indeed, the idea that Singapore 'has all the benefits of the West but is still within Asia' makes it alluring for Canadian Albert Tseng. The 36-year-old has two master's degrees and is based in South Africa as a programme manager for the non-profit Clinton Foundation.

He said his first choice is his own country, but in Asia, Singapore is a top option.

'It is a door to Asia, which has plenty of opportunities, and at the same time, all the benefits - English-speaking, safety, peace of mind - of the West,' he said.

The only downside is Singapore's relatively high cost of living, he added.

Said demography expert Yap Mui Teng, also of IPS: 'The cost of living, the pace of life, et cetera, will not be so attractive to those with less income.'

Singapore's lower score on the overall migration index compared with the indexes for the educated and young suggests that it holds relatively less shine for other groups, like retirees.