

What makes someone S'porean?

Local and foreign-born citizens differ over whether NS is a key marker

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Both local and foreign-born citizens view respect for multiracial and religious practices as the top characteristic of a Singaporean. -- ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

BOTH local and foreign-born citizens view respect for multiracial and religious practices as the top marker of what makes someone Singaporean.

But another homegrown institution threw up a stark difference between the two groups: national service (NS).

When the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) asked 2,000 citizens - half local-born, half foreign-born - if having a male child who

has completed NS is an important characteristic of being 'Singaporean', 69 per cent of locals said yes. Only 43 per cent of foreign-born citizens did so.

That was the one aspect of Singaporeanness that the two groups differed on the most. The participants were given 30 characteristics to mull over in face-to-face interviews that took place in 2010.

The list included markers like 'gets on well with colleagues', 'able to speak conversational English', 'owns residential property in Singapore', and 'belongs to one of Singapore's main ethnic groups'.

Besides respect for multiracial and multi-religious practices, both local and foreign-born citizens also saw 'getting on well with neighbours' and 'being gainfully employed' as top characteristics of the Singaporean identity.

IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan Hoong, who spearheaded the study, said the results showed common ground, but that locals feel strongly about NS as a symbol of citizenship.

He was speaking at an IPS seminar yesterday on integration.

Last November, the Ministry of Defence revealed that one-third of NS-liable 18-year-old permanent residents (PRs) chose not to fulfil their obligations and gave up their residency, noted Dr Leong.

This is an enduring source of resentment for locals, he said.

Referring to the ability of these 18-year-old PRs to avoid NS, he said that 'we must examine if this policy is fair'.

One way he suggested to close the gap would be for PRs to post a security bond for their male children, which would be forfeited if they do not enlist.

In a lively dialogue that followed his presentation, National University of Singapore (NUS) associate professor of medicine Paul Tambyah pointed out that NS is the first time that Singaporean boys of different socio-economic profiles are thrown together. Few Singaporeans see it as a 'waste of time'.

Besides NS, local-born Singaporeans also found it more important than their foreign-born counterparts that immigrants work in a field where there is a shortfall of talent in Singapore, and can speak conversational English.

They also were more likely to view tertiary education as a prerequisite for Singaporeanness - evincing a 'functional and utilitarian' view of integration, said Dr Leong.

In discussing the strain caused by a rapid influx of foreigners, Behavioural Sciences Institute director David Chan said that studies like Dr Leong's were important in shedding light on how citizens 'think and feel' about foreigners.

'It is dangerous to say that we should see immigration in the context of solving Singapore's long-term challenges, and that emotions are a nuisance. They are part of the long-term challenge,' he said.

In the day-long seminar at Orchard Hotel, researchers also presented studies on integration in the HDB heartlands, and among international and local students in schools.

Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing closed out the event with a dialogue. He also chairs the National Integration Council. The Singaporean identity, he told the 250 seminar participants, is not yet fully formed as there has been only four decades of history behind it.

Referring to how immigration keeps the economy growing, he said that 'economic success buys us time to define the Singapore identity'.

■ WHERE THEY DISAGREE

Where local and foreign-born citizens disagree on what makes a Singaporean

| | % of Local-born citizens who ticked this | % of foreign-born citizens who ticked this | difference in percentage points |
|--|--|--|---------------------------------|
| His/her male child completes National Service | 69 | 43 | 26 |
| Gets on well with workplace colleagues | 75 | 51 | 24 |
| Is gainfully employed | 78 | 55 | 23 |
| Works in a field where there is a shortfall of talent in Singapore | 51 | 29 | 22 |
| Gets on well with neighbours | 81 | 59 | 22 |
| Able to speak conversational English | 71 | 49 | 22 |
| Has lived in Singapore for a period of time | 70 | 49 | 21 |
| Has completed tertiary education | 56 | 37 | 19 |
| Has children who are Singapore citizens | 55 | 36 | 19 |

Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

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