

Young S'poreans seeking to emigrate no longer held back by social class and academic qualifications: Survey

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Socio-economic class and academic qualifications are no longer factors in the desire of young Singaporeans to emigrate, an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey has found.

Nevertheless, an individual who speaks English at home has a higher desire to move overseas. This, however, does not necessarily correlate with a diminishing sense of national pride.

The study was completed in 2016, and its findings were released on Friday (Sept 28) after researchers spent some time interpreting the data. The findings were compared to a similar survey done in 2010.

For both surveys, about 2,000 youths between 19 and 30 years old were randomly selected and interviewed face-to-face.

Among other things, the 2016 study found that 29.2 per cent of the respondents said they either agreed or strongly agreed that they would "actively examine" the possibility of emigrating to another country within the next five years.

This was a slight increase compared to the 2010 study, which saw 26.4 per cent respondents expressing such views.

Like the previous study, the latest survey seeks to provide a glimpse into the attitudes of young Singaporeans towards a life overseas. Based on their attitudes, the respondents are grouped into four clusters: "Disconnected stayers" (31.6 per cent), "flourishing stayers" (29.1 per cent), "explorers" (27.7 per cent) and the "disconnected" (11.6 per cent).

The findings from the 2010 and 2016 surveys broadly showed a similar level of intention to emigrate: In the latest survey, 18.3 per cent of respondents thought about emigrating to another country "very frequently or all the time", down slightly from 21.2 per cent six years ago.

However, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, a senior research fellow at IPS and one of three researchers who worked on both surveys, said he was surprised that in contrast to the earlier survey, the latest one found that class had no bearing in an individual's decision to move overseas.

The 2010 study found that the clusters that had the highest intention to emigrate were those with higher socio-economic status and academic qualifications. The responses in 2016 revealed that these were not significant factors.

"I think it reflects the contemporary landscape of transnational movement," said Dr Leong, adding that someone with a degree today does not necessarily have a higher chance of relocating abroad compared to an individual with a trade or vocational skill.

Dr Gillian Koh, the deputy director of research at IPS, said: "But what really popped up was in the category of 'explorers', they (tend to) speak English, not (Mandarin)."

The researchers define "explorers" as individuals with a "high intention and ability" to emigrate, with a "moderate to high level" of national pride and "subjective well-being". However, they also felt the greatest sense of "relative deprivation between locals and foreigners".

This group is typically between the age of 25 and 27, and are more likely to be Chinese Buddhists, with a polytechnic diploma as their highest educational qualification. They largely live in four-room Housing and Development Board flats and have moderate to strong family ties.

The latest survey also found that while the respondents acknowledged the "tangible benefits" that foreign talent bring to Singapore, they also felt there is a downside.

Ms Debbie Soon, a research associate at IPS, said Singaporeans felt that they are shouldering more social responsibility compared to foreigners.

"More see that having too much foreign talent in Singapore dilutes the cohesiveness of society, and more see foreign talent as using Singapore as a stepping stone," she said.

She added that more respondents were also saying they wanted to emigrate because they felt displaced by foreigners.

When asked to name their preferred destinations, respondents from the 2010 and 2016 surveys placed Australia at the top of their list. In the latest survey, New Zealand replaced the United States in second spot, with the US dropping to third.

Dr Koh said the latest survey findings showed that the issue of immigration and foreign talent still matters to young Singaporeans to some extent.

"Our takeaway is, what more can we do in terms of integration?" she said.

To that end, the Government cannot come up with a solution on its own. Singaporeans need to make foreigners feel welcome and help them understand the Republic's cultural setting, she said.

She also hopes that the findings will enable foreigners here to realise that they should also make an effort to integrate.

She added that the latest survey also highlights what matters to youths the most in keeping them rooted to Singapore.

She said: "If we want to keep our young here, we know what we need to do.... but if we want our young to venture out... what can we do to make them feel like they are still part of the nation (while) they are out there?"

Other key findings of 2016 survey

36.7 per cent agreed that they view emigration as a "backup plan" in case Singapore fails, compared to 26.3 per cent in 2010.

45 per cent agreed that an increase in emigration is inevitable as Singapore gets more stressful and competitive. In contrast, only 34.7 per cent of respondents felt that way in 2010.

At the same time, 48.5 per cent felt they could achieve what they wanted without leaving Singapore, compared to 37.5 per cent in 2010.

The top factors deemed important by respondents in determining rootedness to Singapore include having family and friends here, as well as an appreciation for the Republic's public health system and safety.

Home ownership, standard of living, social stability and connectedness to the region and the world propped up the list of top 10 factors.