

Youths' intention to emigrate 'not linked to threat from foreign talent'

Leong Wee Keat

Today, 4 April 2011

The perceived threat from foreign talent is less likely to influence Singaporean youths' intention to emigrate overseas, according to a new study. Rather, the survey by think-tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found youths' intention to emigrate are "positively linked" to factors such as liberal emigration norms, perceived higher status of Singaporeans who have emigrated and socio-economic security offered by the recipient country.

But the study's principal investigator, Dr Leong Chan Hoong, cautioned against "making any causality statement" on youths' perceived threat from foreign talent. "It could be that those who felt threatened by foreign talent would rather compete with them in Singapore instead of relocating overseas," he explained. "Or it may be that those who are keen to leave no longer regard foreign talent as an issue since they already made up their mind to relocate."

SIM University lecturer Selina Lim, who researches on migration issues, felt the foreign talent threat "does not necessarily paralyse" youths. "They may also feel that, since they're citizens, they have every right to stay and compete against the foreign talent, and that there's no reason why they should emigrate and make way for foreign talent," she added.

The study on emigration attitudes, conducted between December 2009 and March last year, interviewed 2,013 youths aged between 19 and 30 years old. Emigration is defined as relocating to another country permanently or for an extended period of time.

The study found four different profiles of young Singaporeans emerging with regards to emigration. Just over half, or 53.2 per cent, of the youths interviewed had a low intention to emigrate. These youths were classified as "Cosmopolitan Stayer" and "Heartland Stayer" (see box).

But about two in 10 of youths surveyed — classified as "Explorers" — are not as optimistic about their life in Singapore and feel threatened by the presence of foreign talent.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser expressed surprise at the 20-per-cent figure. He co-authored a study in 1989, which found that 15 per cent of Singaporeans then considered emigration. "The '80s must have been the golden age of emigration, given that the popular destinations of choice were perceived as allowing access to a more affordable, quality lifestyle, which includes the material things that matter to many Singaporeans: Houses and cars," said Associate Professor Tan. "But ... the world has become far more globalised during the last two decades, perhaps the 5-per-cent increase is plausible."

Besides the "Explorer", the "Cosmopolitan Stayer" also felt Singaporeans were "short-changed" by foreign talent. This represented "the paradox of success" as more educated groups were "comparatively more affected by foreign talent working in Singapore", said Dr Leong.

About 43.3 per cent strongly agree or agree that increase in emigration is inevitable as the environment in Singapore becomes more competitive and stressful.

Noting that 26.4 per cent of respondents expressed a desire to emigrate within the next five years, Dr Lim felt youths' current decision to stay — despite the foreign talent threat — could be “a pragmatic decision of enduring short-term pain for future gain”.

“These youths may view the current period as a time for them to build up their industry expertise, work experience and financial reserves, as these will stand them in good stead when they move abroad in the next five years,” she added.

The study felt the heterogeneity of young Singaporeans makes it challenging for policy-makers to engage them on the issue of rootedness. After having friends (39.8 per cent) and family members (39 per cent) here, youths cited home ownership (33.4 per cent), financial reward (31.9 per cent), public health and safety (27.5 per cent) and equal opportunity for everyone (27.5 per cent) as their top factors for being rooted here. Only 5.1 per cent endorsed political engagement as a factor.

Dr Leong recommended the discussion of national obligations as citizens should be complemented with family bonding and friendship network. “Looking at the anchors, issues of work-life balance, ensuring equal opportunities, and home ownership, will continue to be important areas of public policy to address,” he added.