
Integral

A Report on Social Integration in
Singapore for the 10th Anniversary of
the National Integration Council



Institute of Policy Studies
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Foreword



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The history and fortunes of our island nation have long been intimately intertwined with migration. Since inception as a colonial trading outpost, Singapore's then-nascent population grew rapidly due to immigrants from China, India, and the Malay Archipelago seeking opportunities and prosperity abroad. These immigrants – our pioneering forefathers – formed the bedrock of modern Singapore society, and were integral to the advancement and success of our development goals.

This narrative, however rousing, is far from complete. Today, Singapore is still heavily dependent on immigrants for its survival and continued success: they augment our workforce, check our ageing population, support our households, and fuel our open, services-driven economy. This will continue to persist for the foreseeable future, given our land and resource-constrained realities.

Globally, managing immigration is no easy feat; it is certainly no different for Singapore. The economic imperatives for immigration are clear: Singaporeans recognise the role immigrants play in sustaining the city's nimbleness and dynamism in a globalised world. Yet, the presence of immigrants raises concerns on whether building a coherent Singaporean identity will be possible, and underscores the difficulties of fostering harmony amidst diversity.

In 2013, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), with support from the National Integration Council (NIC), convened a series of Closed-Door Dialogues between leaders of immigrant and local associations to gather their views on immigration and immigrant integration in Singapore. This culminated in the Community Leaders Integration Conference, where participants stressed the importance of harmonious local-immigrant relations and the need for partnership between the public, private and people sectors to advance integration efforts.

While these are easily set forth as ideals, they are challenging to realise in reality. It was thus a great opportunity for IPS to partner with NIC in the 2019 NIC Engagement Series, where interested parties came together to deliberate on integration matters and synergise over possible ground-up initiatives. This publication, conceived in commemoration of NIC's 10th Anniversary, sheds light on contemporary challenges in integration, and features innovative possibilities mooted to promote harmonious local-immigrant living. It will hopefully spark further interest in making integration a Singaporean reality.

Deepening Partnerships in the Integration Journey

The following is an excerpt of the speech by Ms Grace Fu, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Chairman of the National Integration Council (NIC), at the NIC Convention “What Brings Us Together”, on 3 August 2019.



It is my pleasure to be here at the National Integration Council Convention, as part of its 10th anniversary. I thank everyone for supporting the NIC over the years. A decade is not a long time, but it is a good juncture to take stock and consider the next phase of our work together.

Our integration challenges past and present

Being open and integrating newcomers in Singapore began well before 10 years ago. Our Bicentennial commemorations remind us so. As an immigrant society, our forefathers came from different lands to build a life for themselves and their families. At the start, they faced insecurities and misunderstandings across different communities, which sometimes resulted in violence and unrest. Over time, our forefathers began to trust one another as they worked together and benefitted from the co-operation. By the 1960s, they saw themselves as one people, and went on to build a nation after independence.

While our past inspires us, we should also recognise that our integration challenges are different today. First, we have developed our own set of

distinct culture, norms and shared values since independence. As our Singaporean identity became stronger, it has also become easier for us to observe differences in newcomers, rather than what we share in common. Second, during this period of technological and trade disruptions, there could be concerns about workplace competition or security, and workers could question the need for newcomers. Third, it is easier for divisive narratives to spread to our shores thanks to greater connectivity and social media. These could threaten our social cohesion.

With such challenges for integration, is it still worth it? As a small and open economy with an ageing population, increasing numbers of trans-national families, and a low replacement rate, we have little choice but to continue being open. In fact, our openness and ability to work with people from different backgrounds has become our competitive advantage and a strength of our economy. These qualities will help us as we strive to be a hub in areas such as technology, infrastructure development, and research and innovation. We also benefit when people with resources and ideas continue to invest in Singapore, injecting vibrancy in our economy, and creating more opportunities for Singaporeans and our businesses.

National Integration Council

Therefore, it is imperative to remain open despite our challenges. The NIC was formed to pull together members from the people and private sectors to promote integration in the community, workplaces, schools and the media. On its 10th anniversary, I would like to recount some of our efforts in helping newcomers ease into Singapore, addressing issues in the workplace, and enhancing the momentum in integration.

To induct our new Singapore Citizens, the NIC developed the Singapore Citizenship Journey in 2011 to deepen their knowledge of our history and cultures, and to provide them with opportunities for meaningful interaction with the community. To educate newcomers on our way of life, the NIC produced and distributed more than 150,000 handbooks via major touchpoints, such as Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) Employment Pass and S Pass centres, the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), People's Association (PA) and others such as autonomous universities.

To address workplace concerns, we worked closely with MOM and our partners from the trade chambers and the unions. Our studies show that Singaporeans understand that foreign manpower is intended to complement the local workforce as well as build up our local knowledge and skills, but some remain concerned about job competition and fairness. MOM has put in place initiatives to encourage fair employment practices, such as the Fair Consideration Framework. OneWorkplace.sg was launched in February this year to provide resources and funding support to help companies better harness diversity in workplaces. One useful resource is the OneWorkplace.sg Starter Kit, which outlines actionable measures for an employer to build an integrated workplace. We worked with partner companies to fine-tune the measures for greater relevance. Many companies would have received these resources, and I encourage them to implement the good practices contained in the Starter Kit and the integration programmes offered by NIC.

Our partners from the grassroots organisations, immigrant associations, schools and business associations have also stepped forward to help newcomers settle into our larger community. The Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) has helped to orientate newcomers to the importance of Singapore's multi-cultural context, through visits to heritage places of major races. ConneXions International, a non-profit organisation, has also connected international students with local students through host family programmes and home gatherings. Lastly, Mr T. Raja Segar, one of our Indian community leaders, convened a taskforce to promote understanding and interaction of newcomers within the Indian community in Singapore. We appreciate everyone's efforts, including those who have contributed in their own quiet ways or helped in navigating sensitive conversations. I would like to thank you for your contributions and I encourage you to continue with your good work.

Deepening partnerships

Concerns over immigration have moderated and have been manageable over the past few years. This shows that NIC's initiatives have made progress. While this is a good sign, we are not quite done yet.

The NIC organised a series of dialogues from March to June to hear your views and ideas on what more the NIC should do. Although there are difficult and sensitive issues, it is important for us to share them with you in order to jointly find solutions. For instance, we picked up that one of the major stumbling blocks is the limiting beliefs and perceptions about each other due to stereotypes, fear of rejection and lack of trust. To overcome this, many of our participants agreed that daily interactions at the personal level is the best place to start from but we need to first overcome our initial inertia. This calls for the involvement of all of us – all of us as individuals, all of our partners – in the workplaces, social and civic spaces - to step forward and do our part in our respective spheres. There is a role for everyone and every little effort will go a long way.

Our Community Integration Fund (CIF) is designed to support ground-up integration initiatives and collaborations. If you have good ideas, we will be happy to support you through the CIF and link ups with potential partners. The more we pool our strengths and resources, the more effective we can be in building our shared future together.

After 10 years of working together, we want to add new ways of partnership and to involve more parts of our society. As a start, we will form a workgroup with Singaporeans to refresh the content of our Singapore Citizenship Journey. The workgroup will develop content that explains our values and obligations as Singaporeans, the norms of our society, and create a common understanding of our culture and national history. Citizens will have a say in what it means to be a Singaporean. We value your input and we invite you to participate in choreographing this journey for new members to our Singapore family.

Integration between locals and newcomers in our society is an on-going journey, and is part of our evolution as a young nation. We have progressed over the past 10 years but there is still much to be done. We want to do it together with you, through stronger partnerships, wider outreach, and new approaches. We have heard some good ideas, and hope to spark other new and innovative ones.

As we celebrate Singapore's National Day, it is important to reflect on the past 54 years, especially this year where we commemorate Singapore's bicentennial. If you look at the first three quarters or so of the 200 years, we were not a nation. In fact, the British government actually drew lines on the planning maps, on jobs that each race would occupy, and they would have immigration policies around races. In other words, this place we know as Singapore was not built for mixing. It was built to separate, and peace and harmony were maintained by separating the communities. This concept of multiracialism, multiculturalism, actually came only after we achieved independence.

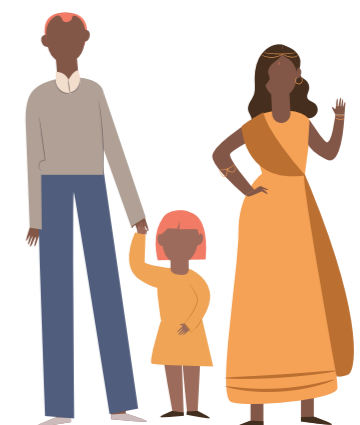
And racial riots happened just a few years prior to that. Just imagine – telling people who had witnessed clashes between groups of people, that they now have to live together in the same block; in the same estate; work side by side and share common spaces with one another – it took tremendous courage and leadership for that generation to lay the foundation for what we have today. Not just on the part of the political leaders, but also the community leaders and the people as they live and work together day to day.

So on this National Day, I think we really should celebrate how far we have come as a multiracial, multicultural, harmonious society. I think we can safely say that we have achieved that relationship of trust. The fact that we are all sitting here discussing this issue among different groups shows that Singapore has something to be proud of. Every one of you can be proud of your contributions, because every part of society is important in building this relationship of trust between people.

As one of our NIC partners said to me, "All we need is courage to change. And we are better off if we are able to pool our resources together." On this National Day, I want to send this signal to all of you – that the Government cherishes your contributions. When you sing the national anthem or wear red and white to celebrate National Day, be very proud that you have a part to play in building our Singapore.

Ms Grace Fu

*Minister for Culture, Community and Youth
Chairman of the National Integration Council (NIC)*



Singapore, Immigrant Nation: Integration in Review



From our origins as a British colonial outpost to our post-independence journey of rapid development and growth, Singapore's success has always been grounded in the ideals and endeavours of immigrants who have chosen to call this island home. The resilient samsui women toiling to build our infrastructure; enterprising Bugis maritime traders; Indian sepoys defending the island; and prominent Arab merchant families advancing commercial and cultural objectives are all examples of our immigrant heritage — amongst many others. There are few Singaporeans whose forefathers were not themselves immigrants.

In contemporary times, foreigners continue to contribute to our workforce, population, and economy. Against the backdrop of our shrinking, ageing citizen population, migrant labourers sustain our nation-building efforts in infrastructure. Foreign domestic workers augment support in our households. Professionals and skilled workers bring with them know-how and experience to complement workers in our knowledge-based, services-driven economy. Students and spouses from abroad represent opportunities for Singaporeans to build bonds and bridges, and expand their networks. More than one in three citizen marriages in 2019 involved transnational couples¹.

Even as our national identity continues to evolve in an ever-changing global landscape, the roots that bind us as one people remain unchanged — a community forged in consensus, not conflict; and harmony amidst diversity. As the National Integration Council (NIC) celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2019, we take stock of our social integration efforts to sustain our cohesive community. As we come “Together inSG” — our anniversary theme — we survey the experiences of Singaporeans, immigrants and foreigners in integration, and explore future possibilities to engender greater interaction and mutual understanding.

¹ Department of Statistics, Singapore, *Statistics on Marriages and Divorces, 2019*; transnational marriages refer to marriages involving one citizen and one non-citizen (i.e. Permanent Resident or non-resident).



Integration: What's in a Word?

There is no consensus on a single definition for integration. Nevertheless, integration in the Singapore context may be broadly defined as:

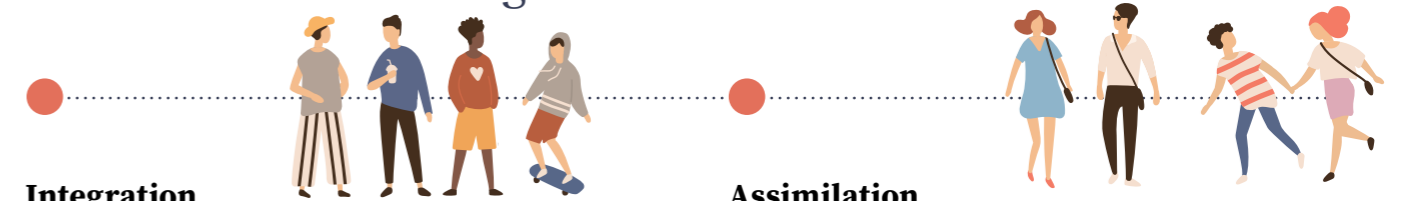
The process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups. Integration refers to a two-way process of adaptation by newcomers and host societies, [and implies] consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and host societies, and of identification and respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and host communities in a common purpose².



² International Organization for Migration (IOM), *IOM Handbook on Migration Terminology* (Geneva: IOM, 2011).

Integration can be understood in the broader context of acculturation — which refers to “changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences”^{3,4}. While other countries adopt different strategies with regards to foreigners (see inset for examples), our multicultural social fabric entails both understanding foreigners’ diverse cultures and facilitating their embrace of the uniquely Singaporean identity, while ensuring the receiving population does not feel displaced in any way by these population changes.

Acculturation Strategies⁵



Integration

Importance is placed on both maintaining the immigrant’s original culture and adapting to the new culture of the host society. The person or group may then be thought of as “bicultural”, with the ability to “code-switch” when interacting with different cultural groups. This is the norm in multicultural societies, such as Singapore.

Assimilation

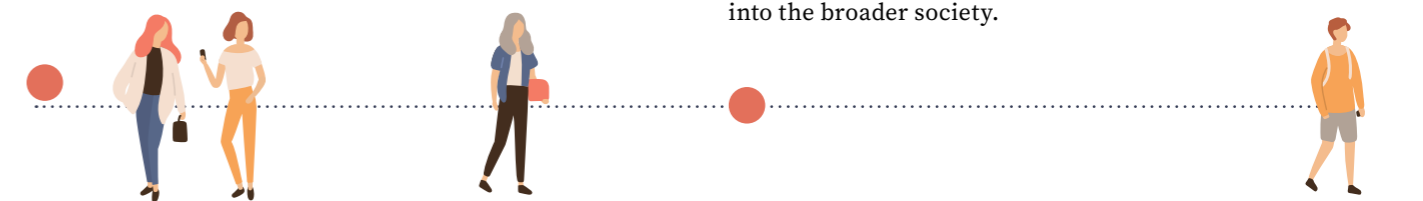
Little or no importance is placed on maintaining the immigrant’s original culture. Great importance is placed on fitting in and developing relationships with the new culture of the host society. The person or group is eventually, culturally indistinguishable from the culture into which they have assimilated. This type of acculturation is likely to occur in “melting pot” societies into which new members are absorbed, such as France.

Separation

Little or no importance is placed on embracing the immigrant’s culture. Instead, high importance is placed on maintaining the host society’s culture. The outcome is that the culture of the host society is maintained while the immigrant’s culture is rejected. This type of acculturation is likely to occur in culturally or racially segregated societies with near-homogeneous populations such as Japan.

Marginalisation

No importance or focus is placed on either maintaining the immigrant’s culture or adopting the new culture of the host society. The result is that the person or group is marginalised — pushed aside, overlooked, and forgotten by the rest of society. This can occur in societies where cultural exclusion is practised, thus making it difficult or unappealing for a culturally different person to integrate into the broader society.



In light of increasing globalisation and people mobility in the world today, there is a vital need to ensure that our immigration policies adequately support the needs of our society and economy while accounting for social stability. Elsewhere in the region and abroad, we have seen how immigration, if inadequately managed, can result in adverse consequences — such as local-foreigner distrust, anger, and even violence.

Increasingly, many Singaporeans marry foreigners and choose to raise their family in Singapore, contributing to a richer and evolving social fabric. Similarly, with our ageing population and low total fertility rate, immigrants and foreigners play a key role in the continued success of our small and open economy. Hence, the topic of local-foreigner integration is pertinent, as Singapore strives to continue being open to and working with people from different backgrounds harmoniously — key competitive advantages of our economy.

³ Margaret A. Gibson, “Immigrant Adaptation and Patterns of Acculturation,” *Human Development* 44, no. 1 (2001): 19–23.

⁴ Seth Schwartz, Jennifer Unger, Byron Zamboanga and José Szapocznik, “Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation: Implications for Theory and Research,” *The American Psychologist* 65, no. 4 (2010): 237–51. doi:10.1037/a0019330.

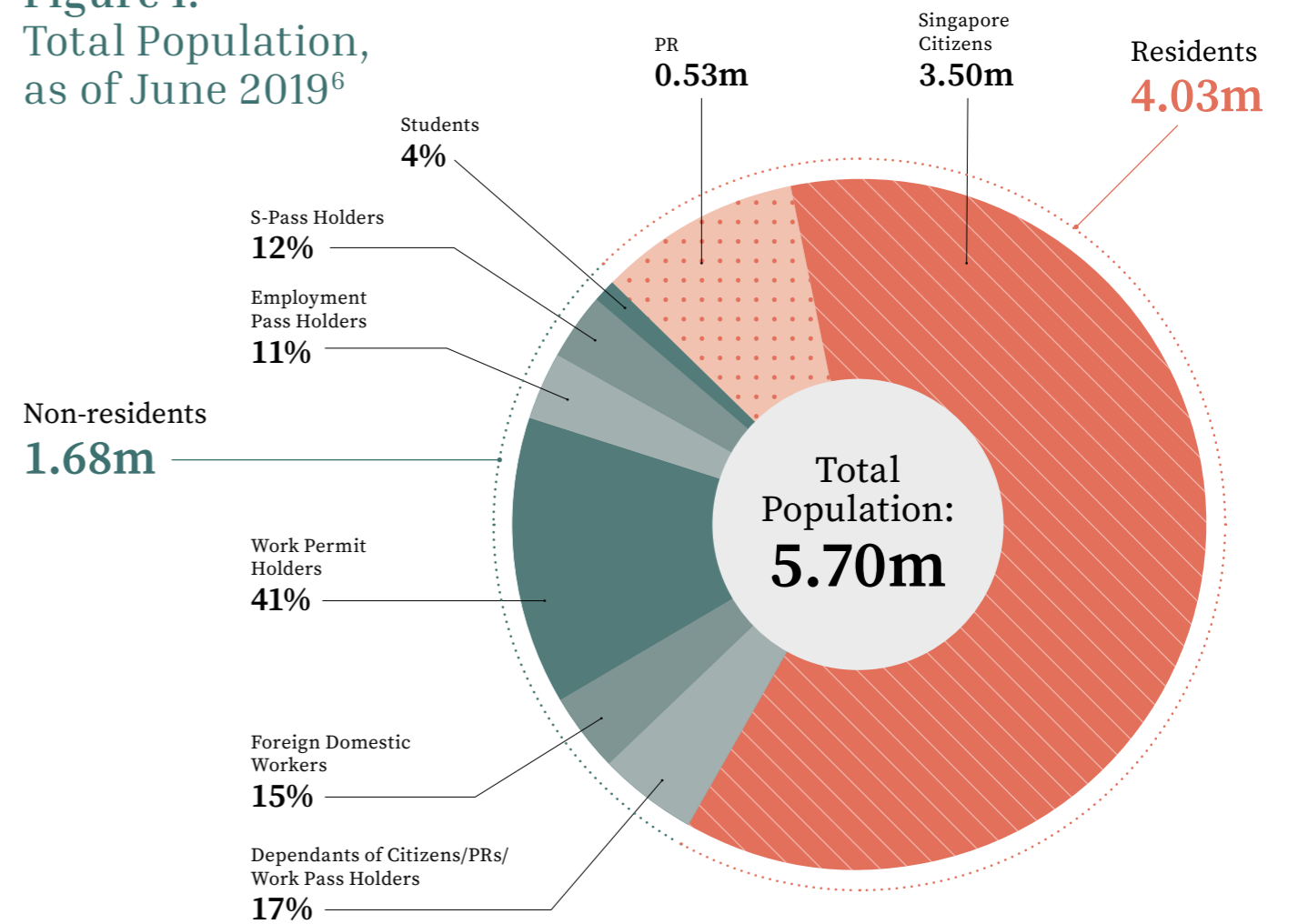
⁵ Nicki L. Cole, “Understanding Acculturation and Why It Happens,” *ThoughtCo*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/acculturation-definition-3026039>.

Where We are Today

There were 3.50 million Singapore Citizens as of Jun 2019. Together with 0.53 million Permanent Residents (PRs), there were 4.03 million residents. Non-residents totalled 1.68 million, and include international students, individuals who are here to work, and dependents of Citizens, PRs, or Work Pass holders. Overall, Singapore's total population stood at 5.70 million (see Figure 1).



Figure 1:
Total Population,
as of June 2019⁶



It is clear that most Singaporeans understand the value of immigration, and are open to interacting with foreigners. Based on the recent 2019 Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Faultlines in Singapore study focusing on key social divisions including immigration⁷, nearly 90 per cent of our respondents⁸ agree that there is much to be learnt from the cultures of foreigners, and that it is good to have people of differing nationalities living in the same neighbourhood. In addition, more than 70 per cent are amenable to meeting and interacting with foreigners. These trends illustrate the population's continued embrace of the nation's immigrant roots.



⁶ Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office; Singapore Department of Statistics; Ministry of Home Affairs; Immigration & Checkpoints Authority; Ministry of Manpower, "Population in Brief in 2019," September 2019, <https://www.strategygroup.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/population-in-brief-2019.pdf>.

⁷ Mathews Mathew, Melvin Tay and Shanthini Selvarajan, "Faultlines in Singapore: Public opinion on their realities, management & consequences", October 2019, IPS Working Paper Series No. 37.

⁸ For this survey, only Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents were recruited as respondents.

Figure 2:
"You can learn a lot from the cultures that foreigners of different nationalities bring into Singapore"

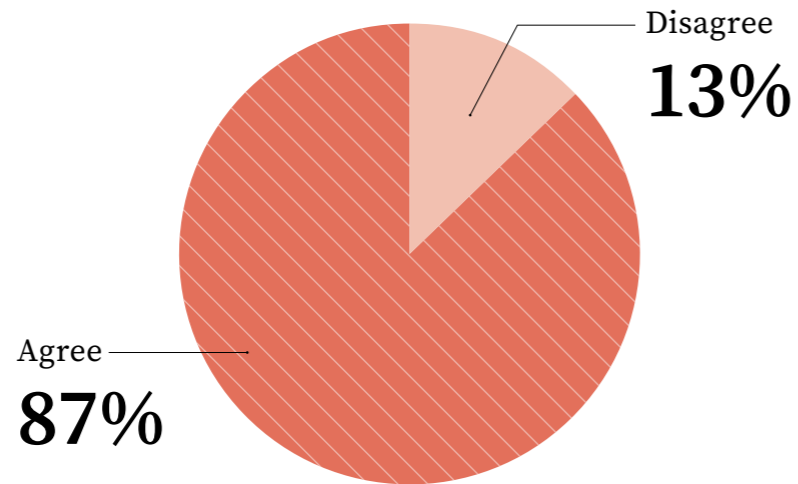
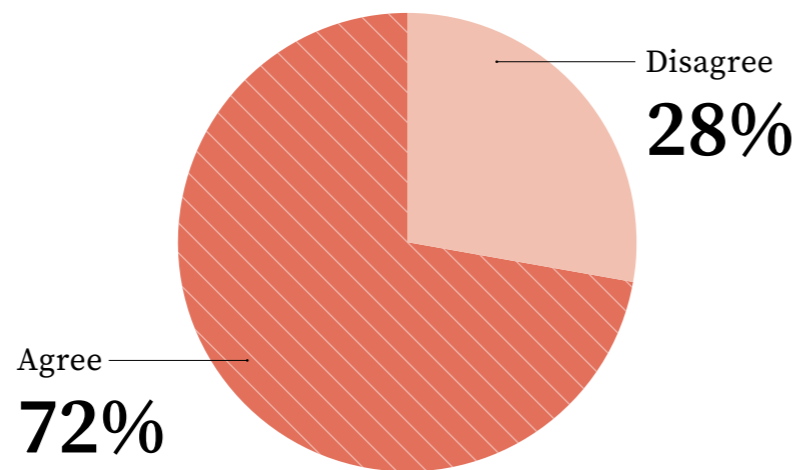


Figure 3:
"I like meeting and getting to know people who are new migrants to Singapore"



There are still different levels of comfort for local citizens when it comes to incoming immigrants, varying across origins and social roles. Based on a 2017 CNA-IPS Survey on Ethnic Identity⁹, Singaporeans perceive "shorter" or "longer" cultural distances between different immigrant groups and prevailing local culture, based on where they came from and their practices.

Local-born citizens' acceptance of immigrants across social roles and contexts, such as being a colleague or a family member, varies too. A 2019 IPS study¹⁰ found that while approximately 85 per cent of respondents indicated being comfortable working with immigrant colleagues in the workplace, less than three-quarters felt likewise having immigrants as close friends. Significantly lower proportions also indicated comfort with immigrants as in-laws (fewer than six in 10) or spouses (fewer than half).

⁹ Mathews Mathew, Leonard Lim, Shanthini Selvarajan and Nicole Cheung, "CNA-IPS Survey on Ethnic Identity in Singapore," November 2017, IPS Working Paper Series No. 28.

¹⁰ Mathews Mathew, Melvin Tay and Shanthini Selvarajan, "Faultlines in Singapore: Public opinion on their realities, management & consequences", October 2019, IPS Working Paper Series No. 37.

Existing '3P' Engagement Efforts

So, what have we done to promote integration and surmount its challenges? In the next few sections, we consider some of our efforts to engage both locals and non-locals over the past decade. In particular, we explore the key endeavours of the public, private, and people (3P) sectors to help newcomers ease into Singapore, and encourage constructive local-foreigner interactions.

Beyond this report, it is worth noting that there are coordinated efforts across key institutions and policies – from schools to public housing, foreign manpower, and National Service – to promote social cohesion, and provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds to come together, understand one another and respect our society's rich diversity.

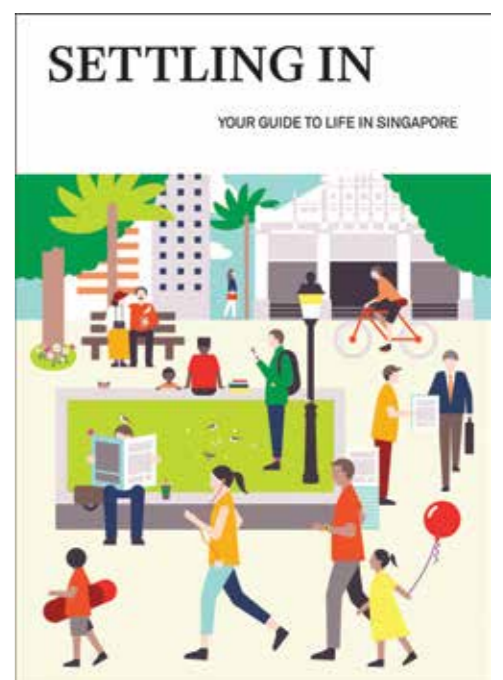
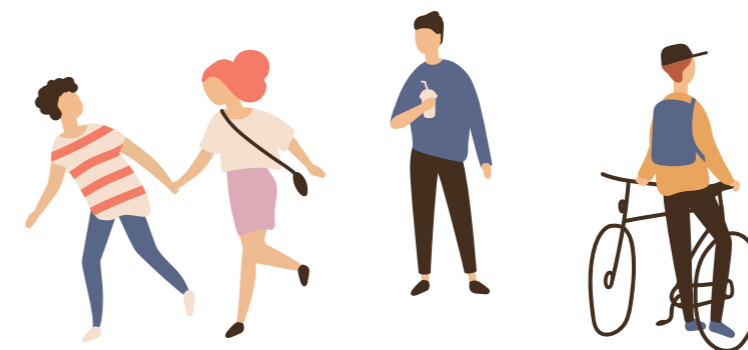
Public sector efforts

The National Integration Council (NIC) was set up in 2009 to coordinate and drive integration efforts in a comprehensive, sustainable and ground-up fashion, in tandem with the partnership of the 3P sectors and input from the community, schools, workplaces, and the media. The mandate of NIC includes:

- ▶ Increasing awareness of the importance of integration for our continued success as a society and nation
- ▶ Helping newcomers adapt to the Singaporean way of life, including helping them better understand local cultures and social norms
- ▶ Growing common spaces and providing platforms for Singaporeans and foreigners to interact
- ▶ Facilitating platforms for positive interactions and shared experiences among Singaporeans and foreigners, so as to foster mutual understanding and acceptance

Some of NIC's key programmes and initiatives are as follows:

- ▶ To induct our new Singapore Citizens, the NIC supports the **Singapore Citizenship Journey**, run by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the People's Association, to deepen their knowledge of our local history and cultures, and to provide them with opportunities for meaningful interaction with the community.





- ▶ The NIC also coordinates the **National Citizenship Ceremony (NCC)**, a national platform where new citizens receive their pink NRICs and citizenship certificates, and commit themselves to a shared future with fellow Singaporeans. The NCC is held around August yearly, in conjunction with the National Day celebrations to mark the significance and privilege of citizenship. Similarly, GRC¹¹-level Citizenship Ceremonies are organised quarterly where community and grassroots leaders welcome new citizens to the Singapore family. The ceremonies feature cultural showcases and opportunities for community involvement and volunteerism on occasion.
- ▶ To educate newcomers on our way of life, the NIC also produces and distributes handbooks via major touchpoints, such as the Ministry of Manpower's Employment Pass and S Pass centres, in the neighbourhoods through the People's Association, and others such as schools.
- ▶ To shape mindsets, augment understanding and foster social integration amongst locals, immigrants and foreigners, the **National Integration Working Groups (NIWGs)** under the NIC are structured to focus on delivering the NIC's strategy in the key domains of community, schools, workplaces, and media.

1

The **NIWG for Community**, supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth seeks to bring together Singaporeans, immigrants as well as foreigners in the community, through different platforms and shared interests such as sports, arts and volunteerism.



NIWG-Community initiative: **Kindness Day SG**, an annual community occasion hosted by the Singapore Kindness Movement on 24 May for Singaporeans to come together in celebration of kindness and graciousness to others.

¹¹ Group Representation Constituency

2

The **NIWG for Schools**, supported by the Ministry of Education, partners schools and educational institutions to promote the interaction and integration of students, regardless of their nationalities. In addition to promoting opportunities for friendships between local and international students, initiatives helmed by the working group also nurture a culture of mutual respect and understanding among students.



NIWG-Schools initiative: The Autonomous Universities and polytechnics have sub-workgroups to develop in-depth integration programmes for their faculties. Over the years, the **Inter-Poly International Student Integration Work Group** has rolled out the Integration Ambassador programme, which promotes cross-cultural communication and community volunteerism, and a series of signature integration events led by each polytechnic.

3

The **NIWG for Workplaces**, supported by the Ministry of Manpower, engages partners in various industries to foster inclusive and harmonious workplaces. Its initiatives help raise awareness of the importance and benefits of being culturally sensitive, identify workplace programming that support diversity management practices, and enhance employers' capabilities to effectively manage their diverse workforce.



NIWG-Workplaces initiative: The **OneWorkplace.sg Starter Kit** enables employers to help new foreign employees adapt to local workplaces and local culture, and communicate more effectively with locals by raising awareness of prevailing practices and norms.

4

The **NIWG for Media**, supported by the Ministry of Communications and Information, works closely with various partners to leverage various media platforms such as news publications, television/ radio talk-shows, and social media to maximise outreach and highlight the importance of mutual understanding, cooperation and community spirit. It also helps to promote learning and appreciation of other races as well as nationalities.



NIWG-Media content: **Project RED**, an anthology of four short films tackling the issue of social integration through fictional, relatable scenarios encouraging empathy, thoughtfulness, and reflecting on individual attitudes towards other cultures.

- ▶ The **Community Integration Fund (CIF)** was launched by NIC in September 2009 to support organisations in implementing ground-up integration initiatives. These initiatives a) provide information and resources on Singapore; b) encourage social interactions between locals, immigrants and foreigners; c) encourage emotional attachment to and involvement in Singapore; and d) promote positive mindsets towards integration. CIF has supported around 100 projects a year since its inception; some of these ground-up initiatives are featured below.

NIC's integration objectives are also advanced in collaboration with other key public sector agencies. For instance, the People's Association, through its grassroots organisations and Integration and Naturalisation Champions, helps new citizens and PRs settle in the community and provides platforms for them to interact with and bond with local residents. Through their participation in various community-related activities and grassroots programmes, new immigrants can make friends and develop mutual understanding with their neighbours and other residents in the community.

People and private sector efforts

In concert with NIC and with support from CIF, partners across the people and private spheres have successfully mooted a variety of programming and initiatives to advance immigrant integration over the past decade.

▶ Community (People)-Driven Endeavours

- **Immigrant and clan associations** provide immigrants with opportunities to recreate their cultural space and find others of similar backgrounds and experiences. In addition, members are encouraged to volunteer and engage in philanthropy within the local space, e.g., volunteering activities by the Indian Women's association, sports and cultural events by Jiangsu Association.



- There is a vibrant **non-governmental organisation** space, with some focused on promoting the welfare of migrant workers e.g., Healthserve. Many others advance ground-up initiatives and platforms to:
 - **Facilitate authentic interactions between locals and foreigners**, and augment their understanding of each other's preferences, expectations and values.
 - **Showcase cultures** providing opportunities for immigrants to learn about and experience local culture – and for locals to learn about foreign cultures. These “cultural exchanges” exemplify Singapore's embrace of diversity.

Annual Migrant Community Engagement

Labour Arty

An annual dumpling party organised every year for the Chinese migrant community unable to return home during the CNY period by Labour Arty, which aims to bridge communities and encourage appreciation for migrant workers in Singapore.



- **Develop empathy and meet needs** by engendering awareness of and coordinating efforts to support our foreign friends. These ground-up initiatives provide platforms for locals to interact with immigrants and foreigners while empathising with their experiences.

- **Interest Groups** provide platforms for local-foreigner interactions, e.g., Singapore Heritage Society, Waterways Watch Society and many others.

Bicentennial Walking Workshop Series: Multicultural Historic Places of Worship & Heritage

Singapore Heritage Society

To commemorate Singapore's Bicentennial year, the Singapore Heritage Society organised a series of four “walking workshops” covering 19 historical places of worship spanning different faiths. The project encouraged local and foreign-born participants to have meaningful reflections on Singapore's cultural diversity, and how it forms an intrinsic part of our heritage and our lives today.

► **Private-Driven Endeavours**

There has been increasing awareness and recognition of the importance of developing cross-cultural competencies and effective diverse workplace management. This has resulted in more diverse and inclusive practices – including local-foreign integration – with some companies appointing champions or committees, and incorporating inclusion objectives in on-boarding training.

Journeys through Diversity – Reflections and Challenges

Nanyang Optical Co.

To facilitate learning about Singapore’s heritage and culture, Nanyang Optical’s local and foreign employees visited the Maritime Experiential Museum, and gave back to the local community by volunteering to bring heritage to a beneficiary organisation at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

NIC Engagement Series and Convention

The NIC Engagement Series was part of the NIC 10th anniversary celebrations. It was organised to grow our community of supporters by providing a platform for individuals and organisations to discuss and co-create integration efforts. As part of the series, dialogue sessions were held between April and June 2019 to capture the views and ideas of our community-at-large on what more could be done by NIC and its partners to expand and strengthen integration efforts.

The public, people and private sectors were well-represented in the dialogue sessions, with 130 participants from local community groups, immigrant associations, businesses, trade unions, and Youth Conversation participants. A breakdown of participants by their origins and domains follows.

Figure 4: NIC Engagement Series Participants by Origin

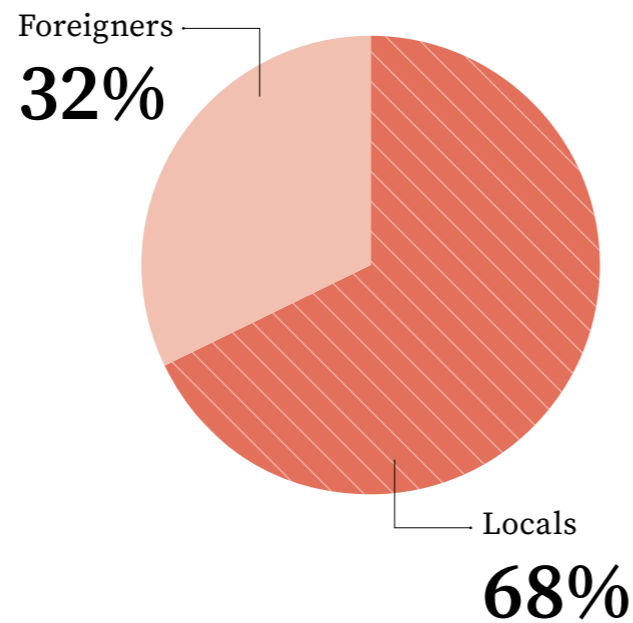
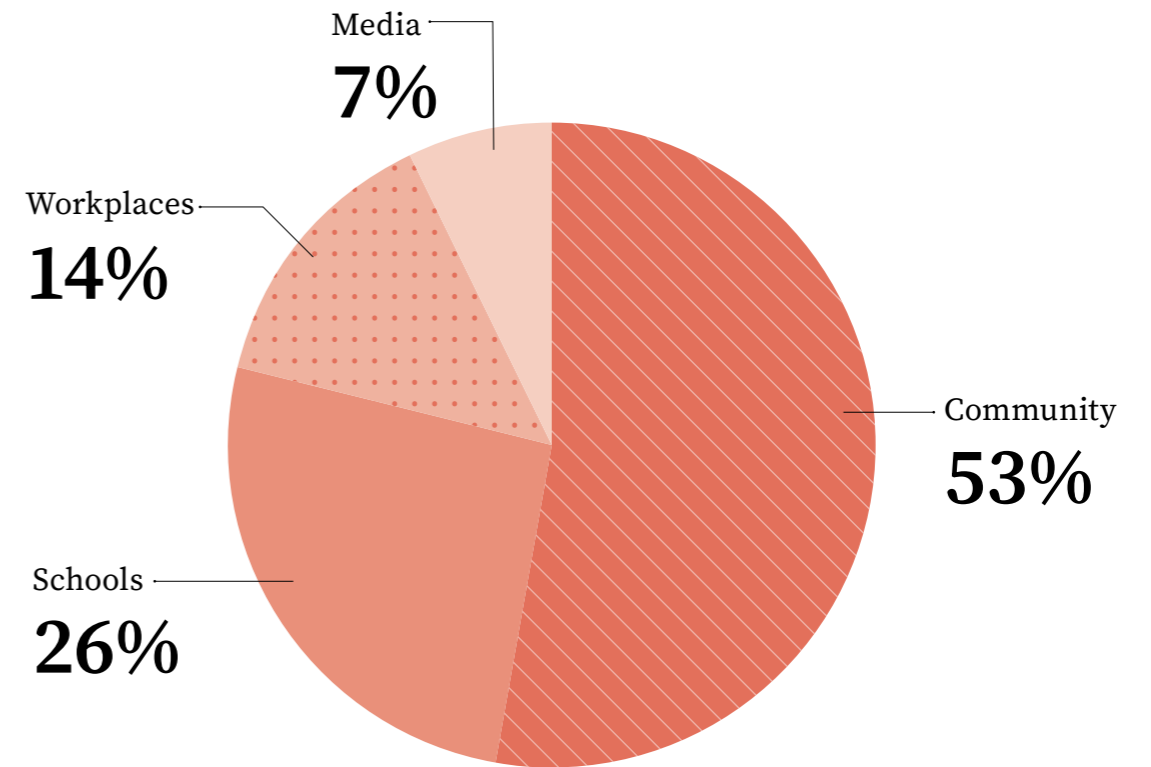


Figure 5: NIC Engagement Series Participants by Domain



These sessions culminated in the “What Brings Us Together” NIC Convention on 3rd August 2019, where key highlights and recommendations from the NIC Engagement Series were shared with all participants (elaborated on in Chapters 3 and 4). Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and NIC Chairman Ms Grace Fu, joined by community and business leaders, addressed the audience and hosted a dialogue. In recognition of the wide-ranging efforts of our integration partners, the NIC 10th Anniversary commemorative book was launched at the event, and NIC Awards for outstanding contributions from organisations and individuals were presented.



Arrival, Adaptation, and Acceptance

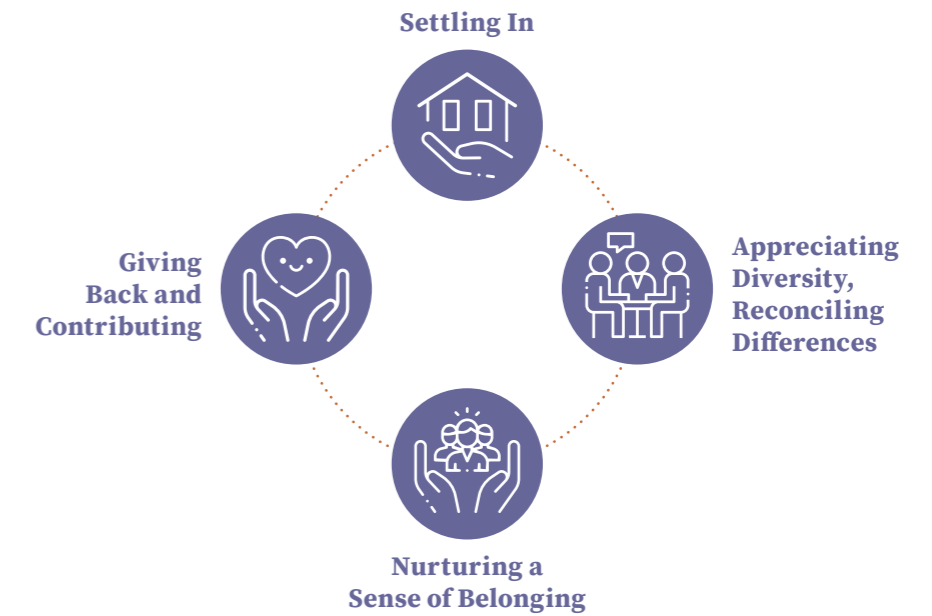


In general, Singaporeans expect immigrants and foreigners to be cognisant of and respect local norms and values. In the same vein, locals also widen their horizons by understanding the cultural and ethnic diversity that individuals from abroad bring with them. In this chapter, we explore how the integration journey spans not only the process of helping newcomers adjust to living in Singapore, but also the ways in which locals welcome and appreciate immigrants and foreigners.

This journey is by no means a walk in the park; adapting to major changes in the workplace and community alongside reconciling cultural differences is more of a roller-coaster ride, with high and low points. Through key milestones in the integration journey, we also consider the various challenges locals, immigrants and foreigners encounter.



The Integration Journey



Settling In

Regardless of whether one is entering Singapore for work, study, family or staying for the short or long-haul, the settling-in process can be unsettling. Fresh off the plane (or bus), immigrants and foreigners encounter various touchpoints with different institutions and individuals as they settle into the new environment. Oftentimes, they revolve around accommodation, “on-boarding” in their workplaces or schools, adjusting to new routines and getting around; alongside checking off many other boxes such as setting up bank, utility, and telco accounts.

Coupled with the need to build social networks from scratch with new colleagues, neighbours, peers and more, accustoming (and acclimatising for some) to Singapore is a challenge. While newcomers can take the initiative and be bold in kick-starting the settling-in process, locals can in turn extend a helping hand, a listening ear and warmth.

From the brainstorming and dialogue sessions during the NIC Engagement Series, our integration stakeholders identified two key areas to facilitate the settling-in process: sharing about the local way of life, and being amenable to and encouraging social interactions. These simple actions will go a long way towards integration.

The workplace can be a platform to help newcomers settle in. A HR executive of a local company shared about the assistance her company provides to incoming foreign employees, which includes helping them understand the intricacies of the Singapore administrative and legal system, and facilitating their experiences in settling accommodation, banking, and taxation matters. Besides colleagues helping to ease them into the local way of life by bringing them out for meals, showing them around Singapore, and sharing about Singapore’s public transportation, the company also organises regular events and programmes to help foreign employees settle in and integrate.

Appreciating Diversity, Reconciling Differences

Locals, immigrants and foreigners often encounter myriad differences in their cultures. For instance, residing in public housing entails understanding common spaces and expectations of living in close proximity to others. Food preferences as well as notions of what are socially acceptable public behaviours may also differ. Language may be an additional concern, with English as the default *lingua franca*, alongside Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil as other official languages, as well as Singlish as the mainstay of casual conversations. National principles such as the rule of law and meritocracy are key pillars of Singapore’s harmonious and stable multicultural social fabric – which may not be the case in the home countries of immigrants and foreigners.

Fortunately, there are many opportunities to understand and reconcile these differences amidst diversity, and even uncover commonalities. For instance, various immigrant associations, interest groups and ground-up initiatives (see Chapter 1) showcase our varied culture, and engender opportunities for locals, immigrants and foreigners to empathise with each other and meet varied needs. In particular, participants of the dialogue sessions in the NIC Engagement Series highlighted the need to continue engendering conversations and engaging workplaces to further this stage of the integration journey (see box story for an example).

A participant who was originally from China recounted how his close, personal relationship with his German neighbours started with the simple act of initiating conversations across their adjacent balconies. Their chit-chats soon grew into shared meals and birthday celebrations, and the two neighbours became family friends. Even after moving away, his German friends still remember his family members’ birthdays and would look them up whenever they were in town. Looking back, the participant reflected that taking the initiative to reach out was what brought them together despite their different backgrounds, and that their friendship was built through these small everyday interactions.



Nurturing a Sense of Belonging

Fostering and deepening emotional attachment to Singapore is essential for immigrants wanting to call Singapore home. Aside from appreciating and respecting differences, participating in a variety of community events – such as festive celebrations and grassroots activities – enable immigrants to glean a richer understanding of, and better adapt to local culture. The formation of close friendships and shared experiences among Singaporeans and immigrants are also key milestones in the integration journey.

Two important concepts are at play here: inclusion and identity. Locals can do their part to be inclusive and amenable to engaging newcomers; immigrants can likewise be courageous in venturing out of social “comfort zones” with peers from abroad, so as to cement new bonds with Singaporeans. For foreign-born students who journey through our education system, National Education and Social Studies allow for a more meaningful appreciation of the Singapore identity beyond mere awareness. All of us can actively educate our young and strengthen our sense of identity too – key areas of collaboration identified by NIC Engagement Series participants.

A female participant shared that she is “made in India, cultivated in Singapore”. Her family brought her to Singapore when she was eight months old, and she has been living in Singapore ever since. Currently an educator in the field of transcultural studies, she observes that youth are often colour-blind regarding issues of diversity, but over time may become more conscious of nationality, cultural, and societal differences. She feels that a spirit of openness and generosity is important in building an inclusive society, as it encompasses a willingness to suspend judgement and accept differences. From her experience, this is achieved through small acts of kindness, daily conversations with people that we meet, and learning from each other.

Giving Back and Contributing

Some foreigners eventually take up Permanent Residence or citizenship in Singapore — significant milestones in their lives. In so doing, they have chosen to undertake deep, personal commitments after living, working or studying here for years; and in some cases, even starting their families here. Many have already become Singaporeans at heart.

While the integration journey is always an ongoing process, many foreigners contribute greatly in community and grassroots organisations, and do their part to create a better Singapore (see box story for an example). As Singaporeans, we value the new skills and experiences foreigners bring which can strengthen our economy; and their different perspectives, values and cultures which will enrich our society.

During the NIC Engagement Series, a Chinese participant described his apprehension about coming to Singapore to work 11 years ago. He did not know anyone here, except for his direct supervisor whom he met over a video conference. He also had the impression that Singaporeans only spoke English and people might be somewhat reserved, adding to his uncertainty of moving to a new country.

His first encounter with a Singaporean was a cab driver who drove him from Changi Airport. Throughout the journey, both men conversed in Mandarin and even managed to find common ancestral roots. The participant subsequently found that Singapore was a comfortable and easy place to adjust to. English might not be his strength, but he was very glad to find Singaporeans quite helpful.

As a result of his experience, he got involved with an immigrant association which helps other newcomers by providing them with settling-in assistance and a familiar space. The association also facilitates connections with Singaporeans through its many community events.



Challenges to Integration

The integration journey is also replete with challenges – both real and perceived. In this section, we highlight some of the key themes that have resonated with participants in the NIC Engagement Series.





Institutional Challenges

Lack of common spaces and interaction opportunities

For certain groups of foreigners, they may have little opportunity to interact with locals, especially if they live in purpose-built dormitories or private housing, whereas most Singaporeans reside in HDB estates. Their children may also lack opportunities to befriend and interact with local-born peers if they attend international schools. These have lead-on effects in limiting the social networks of immigrants and foreigners too.

While there are ground-up initiatives, immigrant associations and interest groups providing opportunities for local-foreigner interactions, some view such opportunities as “one-off” or event-specific, rather than a regular or sustained occurrence.

Competition at the workplace, in schools, and for housing

Considerations of socio-economic well-being come to the fore too, with some locals perceiving themselves to be in competition with foreign professionals and students.

These perceptions of competition may be challenging to accept at an emotional and personal level – even as locals may recognise the contributions of immigrants to our economy and society. Perceptions of competition can easily feed into an “us versus them” mentality, which is detrimental to building meaningful local-foreigner relationships and mutual understanding.



Social and Personal Challenges

Limiting beliefs and perceptions

One major challenge surfaced in the NIC Engagement Series involves limiting beliefs and perceptions of each other locals and immigrants possess. Some foreigners may wonder if Singaporeans are open and welcoming to foreigners, preferring to shy away from interacting with locals or maintain some social distance from locals. This could also be due to differences in professions or job roles, working hours and more. Perhaps for some, perceptions of lifestyle differences between locals and foreigners may deter interaction. Others may simply prefer to remain “socially comfortable” by associating only with other immigrants or foreigners who share similar origins and ideals.

Conversely, locals may also hold and act on negative stereotypes or assumptions of one’s behaviour and values based on his or her country of origin. Stereotypes of differing socioeconomic status or foreigners’ willingness to integrate into Singapore society can also limit mutual trust and understanding.

Cultural differences

While diversity entails differences in practices, customs, values, ideals, language, and norms; these differences may also give rise to discomfort and distancing. For instance, social expectations of public behaviour may differ vis-à-vis hygiene, personal space, and communicating with others, which may result in resentment.

Singapore’s fast-paced lifestyle, replete with close-proximity living in public housing, a dense built environment, and varied commuting options, also pose unique challenges to immigrants and foreigners who may find it difficult to adapt. Language differences pose yet another barrier to integration, whereby locals may expect foreigners to conform to the use of a common language in a professional setting – such as the use of English in the service industry, for instance.

At a broader level, locals may be concerned of potential “dilution” in prevailing Singaporean culture as a result of foreign cultures.

“Just transiting through”

Foreigners who work in Singapore for the short to medium haul, may additionally perceive Singapore to be just a temporary host rather than a home. This is especially the case for those without intentions to seek permanent residence or citizenship. As such, the interest to integrate is tempered; foreigners may simply find comfort in familiarity and prefer to associate mainly with like-minded peers. Institutional challenges in housing and education for their children would further reduce the motivation to adapt to local practices and daily living.

In contrast, locals expect foreigners to adhere to the customs and conventions in Singapore, regardless of whether they are transiting through or here for the long haul. These divergent expectations are further exacerbated by class, ethnic as well as intra-ethnic differences, and have on occasion resulted in emotions boiling over.

Key Issues on Integration in Singapore

Our community dialogues in the NIC Engagement Series sought to:

- ▶ Kickstart the building of a shared vision for a better home that values diversity and inclusion
- ▶ Reflect on norms and values we share that will facilitate newcomer integration
- ▶ Uncover the collective dreams, strengths, and the positive core of the community in building a better home
- ▶ Identify opportunity areas for further future collaboration

The dialogues employed a combination of paired interviews, focus groups, and large-group sharing to encourage open and frank conversations. In the previous chapter, we have discussed the various key milestones experienced by newcomers arriving in Singapore. Following our exploration of the milestones and challenges in the integration journey, we will now look at some of the factors aiding and influencing this process in this chapter.



Social Norms That Will Facilitate Social Integration

In her speech during the NIC Convention “What Brings Us Together” on 3rd August 2019, NIC Chairman Ms Grace Fu said that daily interactions at the personal level is the best place to start integration. Her statement highlights the importance of individual experiences. As long as individuals take steps to be friendly to people from different walks of life, it will be much easier for newcomers in Singapore to get used to living in our country.



Empathy, tolerance and acceptance, trust, and open-mindedness are some of the key values that can help to facilitate integration. Being empathetic helps individuals to set themselves in others' shoes and consider situations from other viewpoints. Some rationale may thus be provided for actions which initially appear unfamiliar or socially awkward. Even if it does not fully assuage negative impressions, empathy enables individuals to understand the context in which actions or decisions are undertaken, and pave the way towards more tolerance and acceptance of differences and new situations.

In addition, integration is a two-way process between the newcomers and receiving population. Individuals who have newly arrived may find it difficult to take the first step in asking questions or making friends. Therefore, locals can help smoothen the integration process by taking the initiative to approach people who are new or need help. Trust and open-mindedness can thus help to facilitate the process whereby both parties open up and learn more about each other's cultures. Trust engenders more willingness to interact with strangers and lend a helping hand. In the same vein, being open-minded helps to mitigate any negative impressions people may have of others based on prior experience and existing stereotypes.

Some participants' stories illustrate how these values and norms can improve newcomers' experiences in Singapore:



Empathy

Two colleagues of one of the local participants had refused to work together because they held negative stereotypes about each other. The participant shared that once he found out about the issue, he stepped in to help them work out their differences and helped them focus on more positive areas. By encouraging empathy, tolerance, and acceptance, the working environment improved significantly.

Open-mindedness

A Singaporean participant had been an active volunteer in his neighbourhood for many years, and eventually took up a role in reaching out to new immigrants in his estate. As people moving into a new location are generally apprehensive at first, he wanted to help these newcomers feel at home in the neighbourhood. Therefore, he would persist in convincing newcomers to join regular estate events and not to worry about any judgment from others.

Singapore-Specific Conditions Influencing Integration Outcomes

When discussing successes and shortcomings of a country's integration efforts, one also has to keep in mind the conditions inherent in the country. Therefore, our participants in the engagement series devoted significant time and effort to explore the aspects of our society that make us uniquely Singaporean, and how these aspects have influenced integration outcomes.



Inter-ethnic relations and social policies

Today, Singaporeans are quite used to multiracial settings and interactions – the 2018 IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony study found that over 80 per cent of respondents felt Singapore is free from racial and religious tension, and that they do not experience any racial or religious discrimination in their daily lives¹². This harmonious society is something that we should not take for granted – it is the result of conscious and constant nurturing.

Many of Singapore's policies incorporate multiculturalism, or the idea that the different groups in Singapore can come together as one united people without forgoing their cultural roots. This entails a common national identity taking precedence over community identities. For example, the CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) categorisation is a major framework in managing ethnic diversity in Singapore, which allow policymakers to ensure a proportional representation of Singapore's diverse ethnic makeup in areas such as housing.

With Singapore's embrace of globalisation across the years, our population has become more diverse, and proportions of mixed-race marriages have risen. This has elicited questions on the usefulness of the CMIO categorisation. In particular, some have broached possibilities of removing or modifying the nomenclature to reflect our increasingly complex demographics.

This discussion also featured in the NIC Engagement Series dialogue sessions. Some suggested removing the CMIO labels when defining the Singaporean identity. For example, if these labels were removed from identity cards, it would possibly blur racial and religious lines, and encourage stronger focus on our similarities and the celebration of our diversity. This discussion will likely become more salient in future given our demographic changes as a result of more transnational marriages, immigration and emigration.

In addition, experiences of participants who did not fit neatly within the CMIO categories reveal some drawbacks of the current structure. For example, using terms like “*ang moh*” and “foreigner” for people who do not look like one of the three main races can elicit feelings of exclusion. One participant pointed out that he is still labelled an “*ang moh*” regularly, despite having married a local, living in Singapore for more than 20 years, and already obtaining Singapore citizenship.

Another naturalised Singaporean participant also had difficulties despite arriving in Singapore at a young age. She did not belong to any of the three main races, which in her opinion made her peers circumspect when interacting with her. Moreover, she did not speak any of the official languages other than English, which made communication more challenging at times.

Opinions regarding the CMIO framework were sought in the 2018 IPS survey on race, religion and language¹³. Only 34 per cent of the respondents were in favour of keeping the CMIO categorisation as it is. Of the remainder, 30 per cent wanted to expand the categories to make them more inclusive; 9 per cent wanted it removed; while 2 per cent wanted to reduce the categories. An additional 25 per cent indicated they were unsure about what to do with the categories.

These results illustrate the wide range of opinions on CMIO. However, a majority do not seem to prefer the retention of the categories in their current form. Therefore, it may be timely to engage in further discussions on how various groups in society can be better acknowledged and represented.

It should be noted, however, that the use of this framework has instilled in Singaporeans strong values – that differences should be respected and not feared. Even if new immigrants may not fit well within the CMIO framework, Singaporeans' embrace of diversity has enhanced their receptivity towards individuals hailing from varied cultural backgrounds.

¹² Mathews Mathew, Leonard Lim and Shanthini Selvarajan, “IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony: Comparing results from 2018 and 2013”, July 2019, IPS Working Paper Series No. 35.

¹³ Institute of Policy Studies, IPS Race, Religion and Language (RRL) 2018 Survey (Singapore: IPS, 2019).

Socio-cultural context and supportive environment for integration

Given Singapore’s strong dependence on an open economy for our success, the effective integration of newcomers into our society is vital. A highly cohesive society will endow all who reside in Singapore with a stronger sense of belonging to the country, and also ensure unity amidst diversity in terms of the similar norms and practices followed and expected in daily life.

During the discussion sessions, participants pointed out some pre-existing conditions that could facilitate integration. These include a harmonious and stable social backdrop; cultural and heritage narratives reflective of diversity; a cosmopolitan cityscape; as well as government support for integration efforts.

A legacy following from Singapore’s role as a free trading port is that the island is no stranger to migration. Our current population comprises different races, religions, and cultures co-existing in social harmony, a value identified in discussion sessions as key to effective integration. These experiences encourage individuals to appreciate diversity, and be more open to immigrants. Nearly 70 per cent of the respondents in the 2019 IPS Faultlines in Singapore study¹⁴ either agreed or strongly agreed that it is a good thing for Singapore to be made up of different racial groups.

In addition, nearly 70 per cent of respondents were in agreement with the statement that it was good to have people of different nationalities living in the same neighbourhood. Being a cosmopolitan city, Singapore’s global outlook has also provided its citizens with an innate understanding about the need for and advantages of diversity, and how to live amidst differences in a tolerant and peaceful way.

These largely positive sentiments towards diversity and new immigrants set Singapore in good stead when receiving newcomers into society. Another trait facilitating integration in Singapore is government support, which has been covered in much detail in Chapter 1. Established to drive integration efforts in a comprehensive, sustainable, and ground-up manner, NIC is a key example of the government’s efforts to realise this endeavour.

New citizens are also given guidance on integrating into Singapore society via the Singapore Citizenship Journey, which gives them opportunities to interact meaningfully with the community. The fact that a committee comprising leaders from the public, people and private sectors has been set up to deal specifically with integration issues indicates the importance placed upon the smooth integration of newcomers into Singapore society.

Given these positive pre-conditions, Singapore is well-placed to be a welcoming place for immigrants who have chosen to start a new life here, if integration efforts continue to be sustained and prioritised.



A shared vision for integration

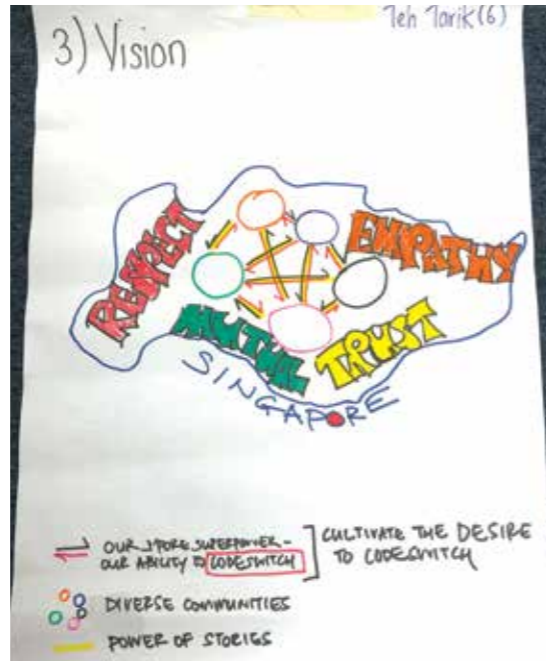
During the discussion sessions, participants shared with each other visions they had for Singapore with respect to integration. Inclusivity was a major part of the suggestions – people wanted to see everyone interacting comfortably regardless of race, language, religion, and country of origin. It was also hoped that Singaporeans will become more proactive in reaching out to others so that integration becomes more effortless.

Many illustrative representations of future visions were created during the participant discussion sessions, some of which are included below. The illustrations all depict the need to 1) ensure unity amidst differences and diversity; 2) share our commonalities; and 3) build a home together.

A series of illustrations drawn by participants in the first instalment of the dialogues for the NIC Engagement Series, as part of their efforts to visualise successful integration efforts in a future Singapore.



¹⁴ Mathews Mathew, Melvin Tay and Shanthini Selvarajan, “Faultlines in Singapore: Public opinion on their realities, management & consequences”, October 2019, IPS Working Paper Series No. 37.



A series of illustrations drawn by participants in the first instalment of the dialogues for the NIC Engagement Series, as part of their efforts to visualise successful integration efforts in a future Singapore.

Creating a common space can help to provide everyone with an equal starting point to interact and grow as a community. One of the participant groups in the NIC Engagement Series dialogues drew an image of the future showcasing the void deck of a HDB block, where people regularly come together to have conversations, learn, and share. This suggestion is echoed by another participant group who would like to see “gotong royong¹⁵” being cultivated and sustained in these spaces by encouraging people from diverse backgrounds to come together, have fun, learn, and grow.

¹⁵ “Gotong royong” is a term referring to mutual help and the sharing of burdens within the community. It goes hand in hand with “kampung spirit”, the spirit of community and neighbourliness.

Attitudes and Actions of Locals



Current lack of understanding towards foreigners

Based on feedback from participants in the NIC Engagement Series dialogues, some Singaporeans may not know how to interact with foreigners. While this may stem from a lack of understanding coupled with stereotypes about the countries immigrants come from, there are also differing expectations between locals and newcomers about behaviours, norms, and the extent to which newcomers should adapt to Singapore's culture. A culture shock may thus result for both foreigners and Singaporeans, especially if newcomers hail from cultural and societal backgrounds dissimilar to Singapore.

Some participants also pointed out the perception that locals were not open to interacting and sharing with others, while foreigners were not open to forging new friendships and connections. Without meaningful sharing and conversations, it is difficult to build new relationships. A lack of openness might hence have led to some newcomers finding it difficult to integrate into Singaporean society effectively. Furthermore, contrary to the belief that newcomers with common ancestral roots with local Singaporeans will integrate more easily, participants also pointed out intra-ethnic variations in cultures and practices which sets immigrants apart from locals.

Actions which will make a difference to new immigrants

Arriving in a foreign land where nothing is familiar can be very intimidating. The integration process, therefore, can be made easier for newcomers if they start off on a good note. Based on participants' inputs in the NIC Engagement Series, there are some actions that can make a positive difference to new immigrants' experiences when they first arrive in Singapore.

Two major aspects of settling in a new country include forming social connections within the local community and gaining functional knowledge about life in Singapore. When locals are proactive in reaching out to newcomers, it can reduce their initial trepidation as they begin to navigate life in an unfamiliar environment. Simple acts of kindness, such as inviting new foreign colleagues out for meals or outings can go a long way in showing that they are welcome. Besides workplace interactions, reaching out to newcomers on a personal basis, including inviting them to our homes and meet our families, also encourages the building of stronger, more intimate connections and overcomes newcomers' initial social barriers and inertia.

Making Connections

One of the participants, a Singaporean, shared that when a new colleague, an intern doctor from India, arrived in Singapore, he extended a helping hand by inviting his new colleague to dinner and other community activities. These acts helped the new doctor and his family feel included in the community, and now they see Singapore as their home.



There are various living arrangements newcomers have to make upon moving to a new country. This process can be confusing and frustrating if one does not know where to start and how to go about these tasks. Often, newcomers will need to grapple with a host of legal and official processes including document applications, understanding the functions of various government agencies, and settling housing, employment, and schooling arrangements. This is in addition to the intrinsic need for knowledge and understanding of the country's history, people, and prevailing social norms. The sharing of such functional knowledge will be of great use to newcomers, since they are unlikely to be equipped with a firm grasp of these practical matters right upon arrival.

Paying it Forward

When a family with young children moved to Singapore for work, they found that things here worked very differently from their home country. One of the participants, an immigrant originating from the same country as the family, made their experience a more seamless one by assisting them when they wanted to find a live-in helper and needed to enrol their children in school. She was able to do so, as she was in the same position many years ago and now had the experience to guide others.

Another participant shared about her experience passing on the goodwill and knowledge she had received from Singaporeans to an immigrant family who needed it. She also showed the family around Singapore, and helped them to connect with the local community here. She felt that making newcomers feel welcome in Singapore would go a long way in encouraging integration.

Building friendships with locals will also help newcomers develop a social network in Singapore, which will provide them with much needed, sustained mental and emotional support as they adjust to life here. Some instances of this include cultural exchanges to learn more about each other's lives, celebrating local festivals together, sharing meals, finding common ground to bond, and growing common spaces to encourage more local-new immigrant interactions. In order to build deeper bonds, suspending judgment is sometimes also necessary, as differences in cultures and lived experiences give rise to varied perceptions and practices. By opting to clarify and emphasise rather than stereotype and judge, both locals and newcomers will be able to communicate more effectively and be culturally sensitive.

Friendships over Common Interests

Having moved to Singapore from Malaysia for work, one of the participants revealed that he was very lonely at first. Consequently, he started searching for community activities and came across a charity event which he took part in. He began volunteering with that charity afterwards, and formed several friendships with other volunteers including Singaporeans and foreigners hailing from different backgrounds and nationalities. These friendships have lasted till today.

Insights from Our Engagements: The Way Forward



As part of the NIC Engagement Series community dialogues, we gathered feedback from those familiar with the integration journey and who had close contact with immigrants. In this chapter, we explore some of the suggestions participants mooted as potential opportunities to advance Singapore's integration objectives.

We have collated these suggestions into three main categories: (1) building networks and sharing about the local way of life; (2) encouraging interactions between locals and newcomers; and (3) building trust in diverse workplaces. These categories also correspond to the main aspects of adjusting to life in a new country, and can thus be instructive for locals who have not gone through the process themselves.



Building Networks and Sharing About the Local Way of Life

Building networks is a good way to develop and cement ties in a new country. Understanding how locals live will also help newcomers familiarise themselves with the surroundings and reduce their fears of navigating a completely new environment. Most of these suggestions therefore relate to helping newcomers feel welcome and ease into their new neighbourhoods.



A prototype produced by a participant group during the NIC Engagement Series dialogues, which showcases bonding and mingling opportunities within a HDB precinct, a quintessential Singaporean public space.

One group of suggestions involves developing the *kampung spirit* within the neighbourhood. They include having neighbourhood gatherings like community dinners, co-created picnics, community events for sports, arts, or culture, and forming interest groups for different hobbies or interests in person or on social media. Other suggestions include logistical arrangements to facilitate individual interactions between neighbours; for example encouraging the use of shared spaces so that people can meet organically, as well as coordinating the timing of similar cultural events so that people can “event hop” and learn about different groups in the span of one day. On top of achieving the main objective of integrating newcomers, these suggestions can also help to forge stronger community bonds amongst all residents regardless of their country of origin.

In order to understand the local way of life, newcomers will need some background knowledge of the country. Therefore, sharing information or knowledge about Singapore’s society, culture, or heritage is essential. Some pertinent suggestions to

expedite this involve the creation of more platforms or avenues where newcomers can personally come into contact with various aspects of Singapore society and learn more experientially.

Suggestions on integration events include heritage or culture trails, international cultural days, food carnivals for local and foreign fare, cross-cultural exchange programmes, and cross-association community work. There are also suggestions focusing on the facilitation of more interactions, such as mobile applications matching people from different cultures, setting up cultural corners in a shared spaces, sharing oral histories or life experiences, displaying photography featuring key Singapore landmarks, and opportunities for the community to come together in celebration of festivals.



Another group of suggestions involves finding ways to better transmit practical advice to newcomers, which are crucial for them to find their footing in the country. More general suggestions include integration programmes that are bespoke for target nationalities and social etiquette classes for new immigrants. There were also recommendations to provide information packs to orientate new citizens and welcome them to the community, as well as having a one-stop website where newcomers can ask questions. In schools, open dialogues could be held with international student leaders to provide clarity and skills on how to manage different cultures and groups, so that they, in turn, can help other new arrivals who may be more comfortable seeking advice from their peers.

A big part of building networks also involves raising awareness of the integration process for both foreigners and locals. To this regard, organising social events like Domestic Workers' Day were suggested. Other ideas included capability-building for locals and immigrants to become Integration Ambassadors, so that they can adequately welcome and provide assistance to newcomers.



Social media was also identified as a key platform which could be utilised to share success stories – of foreigners who have integrated well, as well as locals who have lent a helping hand to newcomers –, and increase the visibility of integration role models. Across all these potential initiatives, an important aspect addressed relates to locals' attitudes towards new citizens. Most suggestions noted the need for people to learn how to ask questions sensitively, and to have platforms for such conversations to occur.



Encouraging Local-Foreigner Interactions



Besides newcomers easing into life in Singapore, there is also a need for them to interact with the locals around them. Similarly, more interactions with newcomers will allow locals to grow accustomed to the new citizens moving in around them. While it may seem difficult to do so at first, having platforms or events that encourage interactions between locals and foreigners can help reduce the awkwardness.

There were several suggestions from the NIC Engagement Series dialogues which involved organising events. For example, some suggested having regularly scheduled competitive events for arts or sports open only to cross-cultural teams. These teams would include at least one Singaporean to ensure the mixing of locals and newcomers. The idea of forming teams for different sports was also raised to cater to individuals with wide-ranging interests. Other suggestions include encouraging hobbies and group activities with specific themes such as gardening, arts and crafts, pets, or indoor games.

Given friendships are more easily forged in relaxed casual settings, entertainment and social events such as HDB block or street parties, monthly movie screening nights, and Meet-the-FDW (foreign domestic worker) nights for parents and children were also suggested. There was also a suggestion to screen more movies showcasing the lives of foreigners in Singapore.



Interactions and collaborations are key to integrating new immigrants into our Singapore family.



Other suggested platforms for interaction included school-related activities, family or social activities, or dialogues on integration issues. The school-related activities proposed include student clubs to promote integration, youth engagement programming, pairing local students with foreigners for activities or competitions, exchange programmes in Singapore, and bringing our students to tour heritage locations like Tekka Market and Chinatown.

Meanwhile, family and social activity suggestions included holding a “Have a Foreign Friend” campaign advocating locals to include immigrants in their social circles; inviting new immigrants to predominantly local community events; and conducting “door-knocking” exercises in the neighbourhood to know and befriend local and immigrant families, alongside promoting our integration efforts.

There were many possibilities mooted for future dialogues on integration and the different forms these sessions might take. One suggestion was to hold inter-religious conversations or visits involving both locals and immigrants to facilitate mutual understanding. Another suggestion involved setting up a flexible space for people to share what it means to be Singaporean, as well as a one-stop location for integration champions or interested individuals to understand how to initiate integration efforts.

Participants in the dialogue sessions also discussed the expectations of future dialogues – they wanted sessions to be primarily community-driven, where individuals were allowed to determine the activities or discussions that were most meaningful to them. In addition, they could learn how to organise their own dialogue sessions, identify interests and issues shared by locals and newcomers, and bring different groups together in conversation.

Developing Trust in Diverse Workplaces



Singapore's workplaces are getting more diverse with our changing demographics and greater talent flows globally. For adult immigrants, the workplace is where they will often spend most of their waking hours. Therefore, being able to overcome cultural or social differences when interacting with colleagues and stakeholders from different backgrounds is important. Within organisations, building trust between employees is crucial.

Participants in the dialogue sessions proposed plans relating either to broad-level initiatives, or educational programmes in the workplace. The suggestions included the establishment of guidelines on diversity management and workplace integration with inputs from various firms, setting aside a day for companies to celebrate integration and inclusion along with the broader community and schools, collaborating with business partners to create integration-related activities or building interest amongst colleagues, and getting individual companies to support Singapore's integration objectives as "corporate integration champions" and empower their staff to contribute in a meaningful, sustained fashion.

Within individual companies, ideas proposed had to do with either HR policies or establishing platforms for social interaction. HR-related suggestions encompassed having a dedicated staff or team to tackle integration-related issues, establishing transparent HR policies to reduce possible tensions between employees, as well as having HR play the role of connector for employees. Social interaction suggestions included holding events such as Family Day for employee interactions, regular meals or gatherings for employee bonding, and focusing on integration in the company's Corporate Social Responsibility programmes.

Working with people with different social and cultural habits also require some understanding of these practices. Therefore, creating awareness of these differences and understanding the rationale behind various practices are required in a multicultural and multinational workplace. Suggestions to facilitate understanding include establishing immersion and exchange programmes, sharing of stories and perspectives about work and habits, training programmes, as well as holding exercises in challenging stereotypes.

In essence, increasing understanding and accommodation for various working styles is crucial for diverse workplaces. Hopefully, these suggestions provide companies with some ideas on how to create a more cohesive and understanding organisational culture. These initiatives can also be extended to students about to enter the workforce, as they would prepare them to effectively navigate a diverse workplace.



Overcoming socio-cultural differences to work effectively as a team is an important aspect of managing diverse workplaces – much like our multicultural groups of NIC Engagement Series dialogue participants.



Perusing the Possibilities



Following the discussions from the initial community dialogues, we proceeded to engage participants in a design challenge, whereby participants were encouraged to:

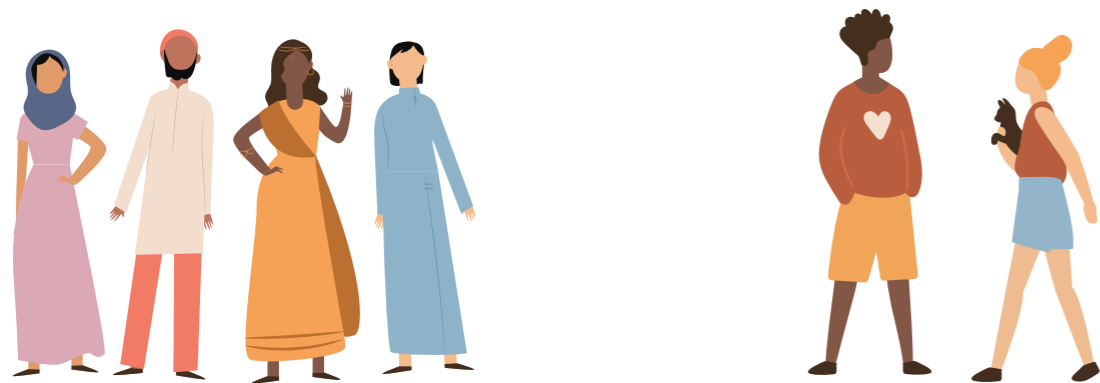
- ▶ Flesh out ideas across key opportunity areas by creating prototypes or engineering ground-up initiatives
- ▶ Identify partners across our network of integration stakeholders to collaborate with on co-created ideas and initiatives
- ▶ Commit to first steps for advancing the ideas or initiatives



Participants were asked to create ground-up initiatives based on eight challenges spanning the four stages of the integration journey (see Chapter 2). The suggested initiatives were developed entirely by participants, and are highly valuable as they represent feedback from citizenry and engender greater co-ownership. In general, the initiatives proposed by participants which had significant potential to come to fruition tended to exhibit the following attributes:

- ▶ Leveraging technology and new media for convenient and quick communications between stakeholders, and as a multiplier to connect locals and immigrants, e.g., WhatsApp groups, mobile applications
- ▶ Creating intimate platforms that are safe spaces to encourage frank and open conversations on sensitive topics between locals and immigrants
- ▶ Planning for sustained programming for broader audiences as opposed to ad-hoc interest-specific activities, to encourage longer-term interactions and gradually transform mindsets and actions
- ▶ Identifying gaps and opportunities to encourage more interactions and understanding between locals and immigrants or foreigners within the education system and in the workplace

With reference to policy and implementation considerations, we present broad-brush feasibility analyses for these community-generated suggestions with reference to the following key dimensions:



Impact

When deliberating the potential of a ground-up initiative, we consider the effectiveness of the initiative in addressing the challenges of integration, its impact on different groups, and the potential unintended outcomes.

Implementation

The feasibility of a ground-up initiative is assessed based on cost, implementation timeframe, complexity, and stakeholder perceptions.

Summary of Design Challenges

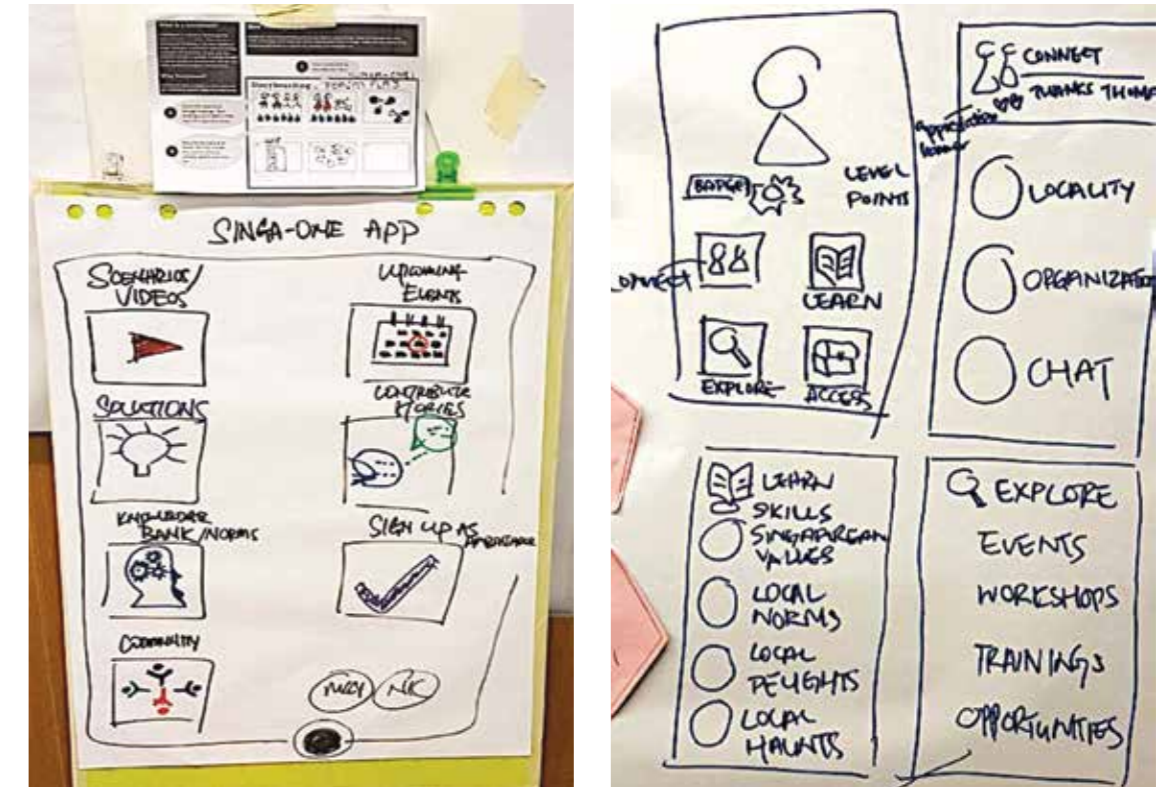
Themes	Ideas and Ground-up Initiatives
Celebrating Diversity and Introducing Singapore to Newcomers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Driving interest-based community activities (e.g., food, sports, art, heritage) to break boundaries and deepen understanding ▶ Exploring national-level initiatives such as designating a day to celebrate diversity and inclusivity
Creating Opportunities and Platforms for Newcomers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Inspiring frank and open conversations between locals and immigrants with intimate platforms with wide OB markers ▶ Organising regular micro-level events within blocks or neighbourhoods targeting a mix of locals and immigrants residing in close proximity to develop and sustain interactions
Engaging Workplaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Developing small networks of community or corporate stakeholders within industries to strengthen relationships and trust ▶ Sharing of best practices (e.g., dedicated HR resources, inclusive teams) and “horror stories” as instructive examples across firms
Educating the Young	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Exploring avenues for students in local and international schools to interact due to dearth of opportunities (e.g., co-organised local culture trips) ▶ Ramping up opportunities for cultural exchange and local-foreigner interactions in curricula (e.g., getting to know neighbours as part of a reality TV series)
Strengthening Sense of Identity and Empowering Integration Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Encouraging locals to “host” immigrants (matched via a technology platform) for a) immigrants to experience Singapore beyond the sights and sounds; and b) locals to interact more with immigrants and “represent” Singapore ▶ Accelerating collaborations by leveraging technology to equip, upskill, and encourage greater sharing of ideas or opportunities

Leveraging Technology and New Media

Various ground-up initiatives developed by participants in the design challenge involved the use of technology and new media either: 1) as an enabler for stakeholders to coordinate their efforts conveniently and speedily; or 2) as a platform for locals and immigrants to interact with each other, or access resources and content promoting understanding and diversity.



A UI mock-up, produced by participants in the design challenge, of a mobile app encouraging participants to sign up as Integration Ambassadors. This initiative enables users to learn or upskill by accessing relevant resources, stay updated with the latest opportunities and events, and be regularly engaged by gamification mechanisms.



Some of these participant-led initiatives entail incorporating already-existing technologies to facilitate information sharing and collaboration, such as the use of WhatsApp chat groups to keep users constantly updated of potential opportunities, collaborative needs, and upcoming events. Others include purpose-built mobile applications to constantly engage an online community of users (see inset).

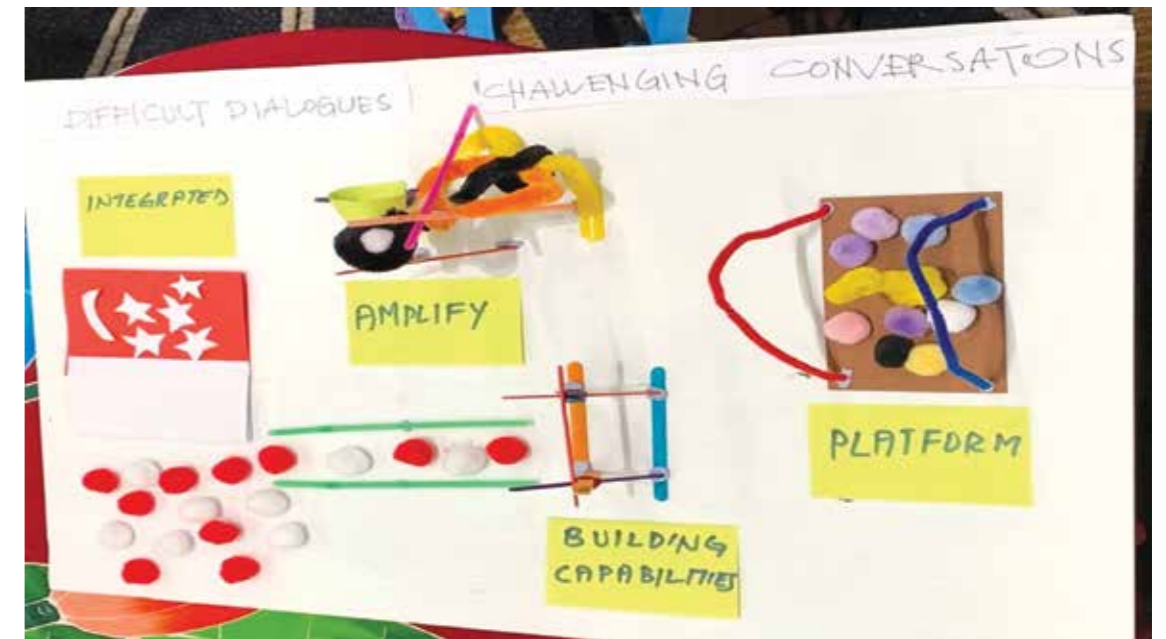
Incorporating widely-used communication tools such as WhatsApp group chats can go a long way to kick-starting and accelerating integration efforts. Instead of intermittent updates from face-to-face meetups between integration stakeholders, opportunities can be disseminated, discussed, and leveraged with speed. This would be especially useful for community-level initiatives requiring a small number of partners, and a specific target group, e.g., locals and immigrants residing within the same block. In these instances, little start-up cost or time is required; scaling is also easily done as multiple groups can be created involving different stakeholders and opportunities.

Developing mobile apps spans beyond merely connecting people. If executed well, user communities will interact, grow organically, and sustain their efforts. However, the success of such applications is dependent on: 1) the receptivity of individuals to use and incorporate the app in their lives sustainably; and 2) the ability of app developers to constantly refresh content and maintain relevance, amongst others. For instance, younger stakeholders may be more amenable to using mobile apps relative to their older counterparts. Costs and implementation timeframe are other issues which will need to be considered carefully too.

Engendering Frank and Open Conversations



An illustration by a participant group in the design challenge, of the framework guiding a ground-up initiative to encourage difficult and challenging conversations.



Navigating the way forward in integration is often fraught with sensitivities; this has the potential to wound feelings if discussions on the issue are not well-facilitated. While it is less challenging to simply steer clear of these sensitivities in favour of more general, interest-based activities, most respondents agreed that engendering frank and open conversations where locals and immigrants can both share both their negative and positive experiences and perceptions, are important to advance our integration journey.

Consequently, many participants suggested initiatives involving community-led platforms that provide a safe, neutral, and amenable environment for locals and foreigners to share their thoughts, listen to each other, and thereafter interact without taking offence. These platforms would have wide OB markers, and could include non-government facilitators such as religious institutions, ethnic bridging groups, and social service organisations able to frame discussions in focused contexts, e.g., issues of local-foreign class or racial divides.

In light of the sustained spotlight on immigration and integration in Singapore, we believe it is vital to continue encouraging open and honest conversations on these issues. While the government can do its part to support these efforts, a community-driven approach as suggested by participants to facilitate engagement despite the potential challenges is needed, in order to foster a sense of ownership and neutrality.

The feasibility of these conversations is also dependent on the quality of facilitation, i.e., whether platforms and integration partners can provide participants a “safe space” for them to air their thoughts. These conversations must also include a wide range of voices in order to be representative of the community-at-large, even though this would involve more cost and an extended timeframe. In this regard, our range of partners across the 3Ps are endowed with the capabilities to drive these initiatives.

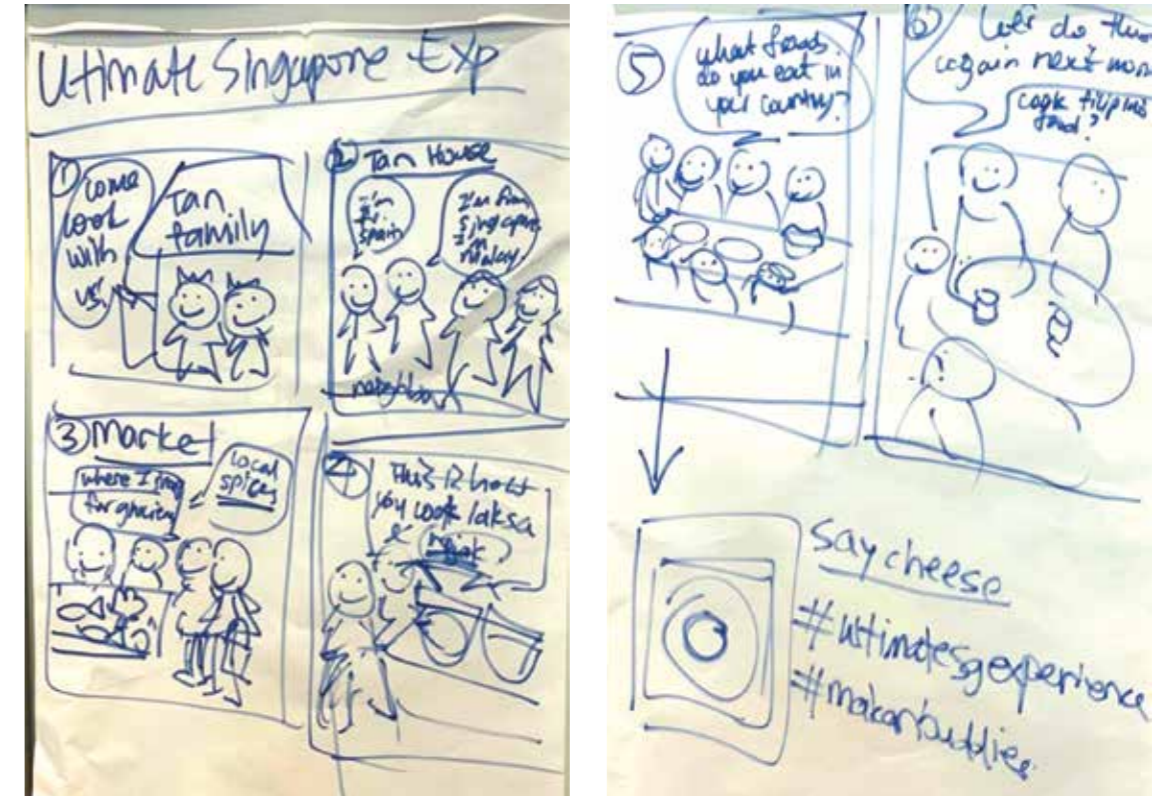
Sustaining Programming for Broader Audiences

Ground-up initiatives identified by participants to have good potential also tended to involve sustained or iterative programming, as opposed to one-off touchpoints. Ad-hoc “meet and greet” sessions over food or sports, while providing a platform for locals and immigrants to interact, do not offer much by way of sustaining those interactions, which would be the prerogative of the participants. In fact, these events may well be the only platform for their participants to interact across the year or even longer, which makes understanding and empathy more difficult to cultivate.



Conversely, if platforms occur on an iterative basis, participants may be more inclined to involve themselves more regularly as they see the value of understanding and embracing diversity. Relationships can be forged and strengthened over time, making for more meaningful local-immigrant interactions. At the same time, these platforms will be more likely to gain awareness and prominence too.

An illustration made during the design challenge, detailing a national-level initiative involving locals hosting immigrants for a day or for a homestay.



One example of such a platform suggested by participants is a hosting initiative, whereby locals are encouraged to host immigrants for a day, or perhaps even avail their houses for a homestay. In this initiative, locals would play the role of a host and ambassador of Singapore by introducing immigrants to local highlights and landmarks, showing them how to get around the city, and befriending them. Such an initiative, which can leverage technology platforms, enables individuals to participate in the experience as and when their time permits. It can additionally engage a wide range of locals who can tailor their involvement as per their personal interests.

In line with the scale and complexity of the initiative, the costs and timeframe for the implementation for broader scale iterative programming will increase and lengthen accordingly. Smaller-scale community pilots may be initiated to test their viability at the outset, before a broader roll-out begins. At the same time, coordination will also involve the buy-in of the relevant public and private stakeholders. Incentivising the public to be involved in these initiatives may also be needed, in order to generate initial momentum.

Spotlighting Schools and Workplaces



Given that we spend many of our formative years in educational institutions, and most of our waking hours during the week at work, addressing issues of integration in schools and workplaces is key to shaping and changing mindsets. Many of the resulting ground-up initiatives identified opportunities to promote interactions and understanding between locals and immigrants or foreigners in these contexts.

During the design challenge, participants noted the need for increased interaction between 1) local and foreign students within the same school; and 2) students attending local and international schools. As a result, they came up with initiatives such as cultural exchange camps and co-organised heritage or culture tours within Singapore. These initiatives could be incorporated into the curriculum, and enable large numbers of local and immigrant or foreign students to interact outside the classroom.

In addition, initiatives addressing integration within workplaces included developing networks of intra-industry corporate stakeholders to strengthen relationships and trust, and the sharing of best practices such as dedicated HR resources, inclusive teams, and “horror stories” as instructive examples across firms.



Visual mock-ups from the design challenge showing how a ground-up initiative on integration within our schools could look like, such as a cultural exchange camp or a co-organised local-international school outing.

At present, collaboration between local and international schools may be challenging. Constraints of the curriculum, such as already-packed school hours and differences in the school calendar, may deter institutional stakeholders from committing to prolonged programming. Issues of allocated funding may also be pertinent. It is hence likely that these ground-up initiatives may be enabled only with the involvement of public stakeholders.

Within the workplace, larger MNCs are often better endowed with resources to pursue diversity and inclusion objectives, relative to their smaller SME counterparts. The cultivation of intra-industry networks is one way smaller SMEs may be motivated to learn from “best practices” and upgrade their capabilities.

Conclusion





IPS Conference on Integration, 21 May 2012

In 2012, the IPS Conference on Integration was opened by IPS Director Janadas Devan, who pointed out that integration is a two-way street – newcomers should respect and act according to Singaporean norms, while Singaporeans should also reject intolerance and prejudice.

These words still ring true today. Integration is an ongoing project, given our reliance on an open economy alongside robust migration and talent flows. In the 2019 NIC Convention, NIC Chairman Ms Grace Fu called on the audience and Singapore at large to be cognisant of how far we have come as a multiracial, multicultural, harmonious society, and to continue to remain open and overcome our differences by enhancing the integration journey through stronger partnerships, wider outreach, and new approaches.

We have come a long way in our quest to develop a distinctive national identity and society, but it is not an excuse to close our hearts and minds to new immigrants. Though they may hail from abroad, these individuals have chosen to make Singapore their home, and many have chosen to embrace their new identity as Singaporeans. There may be trepidation and unfamiliarity as they embark on their new lives in Singapore, but locals can help to make their integration journey a smoother and more amenable one.

The dialogue sessions held as part of the NIC Engagement Series from April to June 2019

surfaced many useful insights and suggestions from participants across our 3P sectors familiar with the integration journey. These discussions covered both positive and negative aspects of immigrant integration in Singapore, as well as a wide range of possibilities to further sharpen our integration efforts.



Participants brainstorming various possibilities for future integration efforts at the NIC Engagement Series dialogue sessions



A wordcloud generated from the various keywords surfaced in discussions during the dialogue sessions

From participants' inputs from the NIC Engagement Series, it is clear that at present, various programmes and initiatives are in place to render assistance to immigrants across nearly every aspect of their lives. These provide robust support for newcomers to Singapore in their integration journey. However, despite the comprehensiveness of these programmes, there is still much to be done.

We are not an unwelcoming society by any measure, but many locals are shy or unsure of what to do when they meet people from unfamiliar countries or cultures. As a result, many tend to avoid contact, or fall back on general stereotypes when interacting with foreigners or immigrants who may not have a firm grasp of the “Singaporean way of life”. With “hardware” of integration firmly established, the next step will be to focus on the “software” by empowering our people to open their hearts and embrace newcomers to Singapore.



Our social networks are extremely important in rooting our residents to our country, and ensuring that they will be able to find support in times of need. Singapore must aim not just to be an open economy where people of all nationalities can come and work, but expand our vision to become a nation where people of all nationalities feel fully at home. Integration, therefore, should be an ongoing project that involves every individual residing in Singapore – including local-born citizens, naturalised citizens, newly-arrived immigrants, and the rest of our resident population.

After over five decades of independence, Singapore has achieved a remarkable degree of social harmony. With continued commitment from all, we will be able to realise a common vision of a vibrant society, embodying unity in diversity through integration, and rooted in its people.



An aspirational tree diagram drawn during the NIC Engagement Series, symbolising the integration journey connecting our people and enabling them to exemplify unity in diversity



Acknowledgements



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| Common Purpose | SIM Global Education |
| Filipino Association of Singapore | Singapore Amoy Association |
| Food, Drinks and Allied Workers Union | Singapore Bangladesh Society |
| Healthcare Services Employees' Union | Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre |
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About the Institute of Policy Studies

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was established in 1988 as an independent think-tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore. IPS became an autonomous research centre of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore in 2008.

Today, IPS continues to analyse public policy, build bridges between thought leaders, and communicate its findings to a wide audience. The Institute examines issues of critical national interest across a variety of fields, and studies the attitudes and aspirations of Singaporeans through surveys of public perception. It adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analysis and takes the long-term view in its strategic deliberations and research.



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