

**SESSION NOTES FOR “NOT MERE SPECTATORS”: GUIDED TOUR AND FIRESIDE
CHAT WITH ACTING MINISTER DAVID NEO
5 FEBRUARY 2026, 6.30PM-9.00PM
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE, ROOFTOP STUDIOS**

On 5 February 2026, 27 youths from diverse backgrounds and active in promoting social cohesion gathered to engage in discussions about multiculturalism in Singapore. Participants first took part in a guided tour of the "Not Mere Spectators: The Makings of Multicultural Singapore" exhibition, where they learnt how Singapore's multicultural identity was shaped through intentional policies, community initiatives, and active participation of citizens.

Following which, participants took part in breakout group discussions over dinner, followed by a fireside chat with Acting Minister David Neo. The group discussions and fireside chat allowed participants to reflect on the exhibition and their lived experience of multiculturalism, share their aspirations of the future state of multiculturalism, and suggest resources needed to build a more cohesive society.

The session was co-organised by the National Heritage Board (NHB) and the National Youth Council (NYC), and involved :

- Mr David Neo, Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, and Senior Minister of State for Education
- (Moderator) Ms Druga Rajendran, Partner and Principal Consultant, Sequoia Group and NYC INSPIRIT Youth Leader

Key Insights from the Large Group Share Back and Fireside Chat

Segment 1: Reflection on "Not Mere Spectators" Exhibition and Lived Experiences

Issue: Multiculturalism and integration require organic, empathetic approaches rather than formal structures

Key insights from the large group share back

- Participants said that the exhibition highlighted Singapore's intentional effort to embrace diversity while forging a shared national identity and resonated with their personal experiences, particularly around mixed heritage and identity struggles, with materials on display revealing nuances of nation-building beyond formal education.
- Participants said that racial harmony remained a work in progress and racial incidents were a reminder that we should not take what we have for granted, with society needing to choose empathy over confrontation by calling people in to educate rather than calling them out.
- In response to the participants, Min Neo said that multiculturalism was a conscious decision from the early years and remains ongoing work, requiring Singapore to focus on being other-centred rather than me-centred, as complacency would lead to failure.

**SESSION NOTES FOR “NOT MERE SPECTATORS”: GUIDED TOUR AND FIRESIDE
CHAT WITH ACTING MINISTER DAVID NEO
5 FEBRUARY 2026, 6.30PM-9.00PM
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE, ROOFTOP STUDIOS**

Key insights from the fireside chat

The moderator asked Min Neo how he viewed racial harmony in an evolving Singapore as we become more diverse with foreigners and new citizens.

- Min Neo said that Singapore's approach to multiculturalism encouraged different groups to keep their cultures while finding common ground, unlike other countries that enforced a singular cultural identity or maintained distinctively separate cultures.
- He also said that conscious decisions like adopting English as a working language involved sacrificing certain cultural nuances but was necessary for building a common language to unite Singaporeans.

Participants asked Min Neo about the integration pathways for new citizens and the process for granting Permanent Resident (PR) status, sharing that the requirements seemed opaque.

- Min Neo said that having a set criteria for PR and citizenship was not ideal as it may reduce identity formation to a transactional exercise.
- He also said that an applicant's ability to assimilate, genuine community participation and understanding of local norms mattered more, with the process kept deliberately opaque to prevent gaming of the system.

Segment 2: Aspired state of multiculturalism and social cohesion in Singapore

Issue: Singapore's multicultural future requires intentional communication, organic cultural evolution, and equal treatment for all.

Key insights from large group share back

- Participants said that they envisioned a future where diversity is intentionally embraced, with different groups, cultures, and languages consciously recognised and accepted.
- Participants said that people often made remarks about other religions or cultures without realising such comments may offend, highlighting the need for more mindful communication as words are powerful and can influence many others.
- Participants said that it was important to focus on shared similarities and work towards building a shared future with others.

Key insights from the fireside chat

A participant said that young Singaporeans often struggled to express their cultural identity when representing the country internationally, often defaulting to National Day songs instead of authentic cultural performances, and asked whether this reflected challenges in showcasing Singapore's diverse heritage.

- Min Neo said that Singapore's approach has not been to dictate a fixed identity but to allow a distinctive multicultural identity to gradually emerge, citing examples of local

**SESSION NOTES FOR “NOT MERE SPECTATORS”: GUIDED TOUR AND FIRESIDE
CHAT WITH ACTING MINISTER DAVID NEO
5 FEBRUARY 2026, 6.30PM-9.00PM
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE, ROOFTOP STUDIOS**

brands like yIN Harmony that blends Chinese drums and Indian flutes into recognisably Singaporean pieces and local designers that create distinctive Singaporean batik styles.

- He also said that over time, as Singapore matures as a nation, a distinctive, multicultural identity would take shape, making the showcase of Singapore’s cultural identity more straightforward.

A participant asked whether Singapore's policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy that explicitly categorise differences would continue to work in the future, and what the Government's ultimate vision was for the country's multicultural society.

- Min Neo said that the goal has remained unchanged from the beginning, with Singapore being a nation that worked for everybody regardless of race, language, or religion and where everyone would be treated equally with a fair chance in life.
- He said that Singapore was not a Malay, Indian, or Chinese nation but a Singapore nation, and policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy served as changeable frameworks that created a common space for people to come together as one nation while ensuring that different cultural groups remain recognised and valued.

Segment 3 – Working together to reach the aspired state of a multicultural Singapore

Issue: Addressing Singapore's multicultural challenges requires coordinated efforts across education, community engagement, and workplace integration.

Key insights from the large group share back

- Participants said that Singaporeans were not as bilingual as in the past and struggled to capture language nuances, and suggested for the Government to leverage media platforms like radio and podcasts to informally educate on Mother Tongue Languages without examination stress.
- Participants also said that parents should speak to their children in their second language at home and that influencers or popular figures could encourage people to learn and practice Mother Tongue Languages.
- Participants said that there was a need to relook into how Singapore defined multiculturalism in an increasingly complex demographic makeup. For example, national education could be strengthened to correct misconceptions that cultural celebrations such as Chinese New Year or Deepavali were exclusive to specific races.
- In response to the participants, Min Neo said that multiculturalism was always a work in progress and they must keep working on it. He said that challenges like declining bilingualism in schools were due to various pressures including falling student numbers that lead to school closures. He said that as student numbers shrink, schools have consolidated resources by replacing multiple cultural dance CCAs with a single Modern Dance CCA, and that it was necessary to intentionally plan and

**SESSION NOTES FOR “NOT MERE SPECTATORS”: GUIDED TOUR AND FIRESIDE
CHAT WITH ACTING MINISTER DAVID NEO
5 FEBRUARY 2026, 6.30PM-9.00PM
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE, ROOFTOP STUDIOS**

allocate resources for diverse cultural programmes at the systemic level so that students still get to experience other cultures and languages.

Key insights from the fireside chat

A participant asked if there were government plans to establish structured networks for foreigners or immigrants, noting that foreign communities were fragmented and immigrants often joined volunteer activities because they lacked their own community networks.

- Min Neo said that integration efforts focused on workplaces through initiatives like the Alliance for Action that helped newcomers understand Singapore values, as surveys showed that the workplace was the primary place where people spent their time and were most influenced.
- He also encouraged interested participants to be involved in such workplace-based efforts to support integration efforts.

Closing remarks by Min Neo

- Min Neo said Singapore’s distinctive approach to multiculturalism did not seek to make everyone the same, but rather celebrated each culture’s diversity whilst building common understanding between communities.
- Min Neo said it was crucial for people to advocate not only for themselves but actively for others, noting that whilst immediate concerns like cost of living required attention, larger cohesion issues must also be prioritised.
- He said this generation would witness many of these social cohesion efforts bearing fruit, and he encouraged participants to continue engaging with these important issues.

Notes recorded by the NYC Youth Leadership and Engagement team.