

National Youth Council (NYC) x Singapore Polytechnic (SP) Webinar Series

Webinar #2 - Bridging Cultures, Building Unity: Harmony in Diversity through Local-Foreigner Integration

24 January 2024 | Online (Zoom)

On 24 January 2024, 171 youths from Singapore Polytechnic (SP) gathered for a webinar focused on local-foreigner integration. The session allowed students to understand i) the importance of ensuring integration between locals and foreigners; ii) the current issues that prevent locals and foreigners from coexisting in harmony; and iii) the ways to increase cultural sensitivity and respect between local and foreigners in everyday interactions.

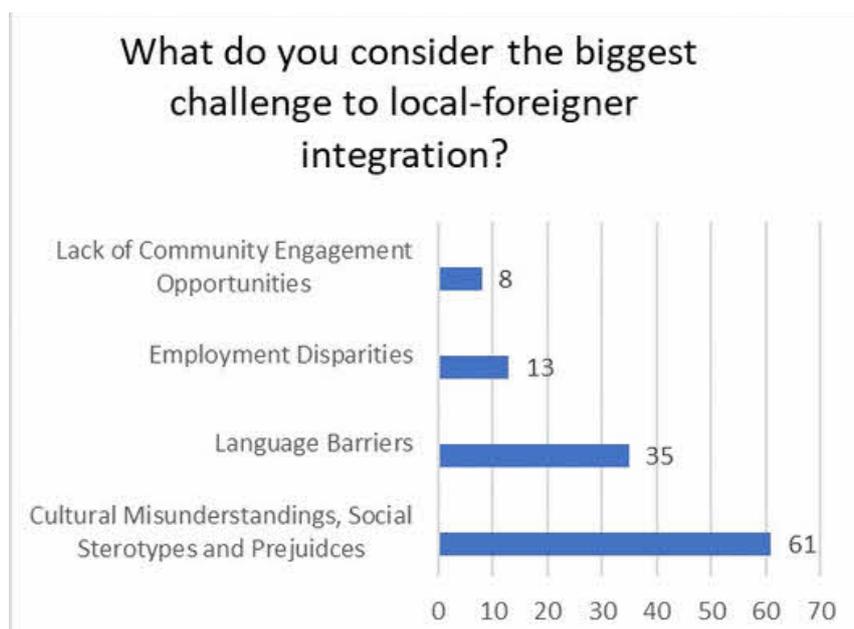
This session was co-organised by SP and the National Youth Council (NYC), and involved the following the following panellists:

- Ms Johanna Dy Juanco, a foreigner working in Singapore, and Member of Global Shapers Community (Singapore Hub)
- Mr Melvin Tay, Research Associate in the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab
- (Moderator) Ms Qistina Roslan, Freelance Emcee, Korean Translator, Producer of CNA938 and 31st NTU Students' Union Integration Executive



(i) Importance of Local-Foreigner Integration

The session started with an ice-breaker poll - “What do you consider the biggest challenge to local-foreigner integration?”:



- From the Zoom poll, the top answers given by participants were (i) Cultural misunderstandings, social stereotypes and prejudices, (ii) Language barriers, and (iii) Employment disparities

1) Ms Qistina asked the panelists what local-foreigner integration meant to them.

- Mr Tay said that local-foreigner integration involved creating an environment where individuals could carry out their daily activities comfortably and without fear.
- Ms Dy Juanco said that local-foreigner integration meant the presence of a community and sense of belonging where individuals were surrounded by friends who know, appreciate, and value them and resultantly made places feel like home for both locals and foreigners.

2) Participants asked (via Pre-Webinar Questionnaire) about the importance of local-foreigner integration and how it would enhance the global perspectives of Singaporeans.

- Ms Dy Juanco shared that local-foreigner integration was crucial and individuals should not adopt an “us versus them” mentality. She said that individuals should focus on understanding and embracing different cultures and practices to broaden their worldviews and harness the unique strengths of each individual, and this would contribute to Singapore's progress as a nation on the global stage.

3) Ms Qistina asked about the factors that contribute to the demand for foreigners in Singapore.

- Mr Tay said that there was a demand for foreigners in various industries (e.g. construction) and their contribution had positively impacted Singapore's economy. He also shared that the presence of foreigners had helped shape the diverse cultural landscape of Singapore.

4) Participants asked (via Zoom Webinar QnA) about the differences between tolerance and integration.

- Ms Dy Juanco said that tolerance could reflect feelings of negativity in an individual's mannerisms and speech. She also said that tolerance could breed resentment and create rifts between different groups.
- Mr Tay shared the analogy of taking feedback from an insufferable superior where individuals tolerated the feedback given and were not engaged further. He said that integration required active engagement to understand different views and cultures, and this would provide a foundation for foreigners to assimilate into a community.

5) Participants asked (via Pre-Webinar Questionnaire) about the role of social media in shaping cultural exchanges in an interconnected world.

- Ms Dy Juanco said that the rapid speed at which information and opinions were condensed and spread online raised questions about its validity. She shared that it was important for users to verify information before accepting opinions as facts.
- Mr Tay agreed with Ms Dy Juanco and shared that some online opinions could be very insidious and weaponised to influence an individual's mindset. He said that conversely, social media could also be used positively to sustain relationships, connect people, and amplify positive experiences.

(ii) Challenges to Local-Foreigner Integration

6) Participants asked (via Pre-Webinar Questionnaire) about the challenges that hindered local-foreigner integration in Singapore.

- Mr Tay said that the issue of integration was multifaceted and involved aspects such as race, religion, and class. He said that addressing integration-related issues was a complex task which required individuals to be aware of potentially shifting goalposts in the process.
- Ms Dy Juanco acknowledged the progress society had made in integration efforts and shared that there were formal structures in place that encourage community building by providing common spaces for individuals to convene and have conversations.

7) Participants asked (via Zoom Webinar QnA) how they should approach classmates from different cultures to form good relationships with them.

- Ms Dy Juanco said that several factors contributed to a foreigner feeling uncomfortable, e.g. the existence of established groups, and suggested that individuals could approach their foreign peers with kindness and curiosity. She said that participants could initiate conversations to learn about their foreign peers' backgrounds and find commonalities. She shared that she valued simple gestures like a quick smile, or when groups of friends reached out to include her.
- Mr Tay said that youths should seize opportunities to meet and understand individuals from diverse backgrounds. He said that empathy, along with shared passions such as sports or drama, could help foster friendships. He shared that offering knowledge and assistance to foreign peers could lead to building connections. He also said that being able to collaborate and work with foreigners was an essential skill set, and individuals should be open to interacting with diverse cultures.

8) Participants asked (via Zoom Webinar QnA) how youths could manage cultural appropriation while trying to bridge the different cultures.

- Mr Tay said that cultural appropriation could occur when well-intentioned individuals misrepresented the tenets of another individual's culture while attempting to make them feel comfortable. He said that this was a grey area and advised youths to carefully assess the circumstances before acting.
- Ms Dy Juanco advised youths against generalising and forming prejudices about cultures while attempting to build relationships, to avoid unintentionally hurting the feelings of others.

9) Ms Qistina asked about the challenges faced as a foreigner in Singapore.

- Ms Dy Juanco shared that getting used to the competitive "kiasu" culture was difficult for her given how normalised it was in Singapore. She also said that locals were less spontaneous than foreigners and shared that she still found it difficult to find local friends for last-minute hangouts.
- Mr Tay said that foreigners might find it difficult to assimilate into Singapore's fast-paced lifestyle. He said that an individual's approach to integration was key, as it would shape their interactions with locals and impact their ability to overcome these challenges.

10) Participants asked (via Pre-Webinar Questionnaire) about negative experiences in communities where locals and foreigners came together, and how youths could avoid them.

- Mr Tay said that negative stereotypes of locals or foreigners could result in xenophobia or racism. He said that mindsets could be changed through various engagement platforms, where individuals could learn and understand their peers' cultures to debunk stereotypes.
- Ms Dy Juanco acknowledged the sensitivity of topics in local-foreigner discussions, e.g. foreigners taking the jobs of Singaporeans. She shared that she received hurtful comments from local friends who could not relate when she shared the challenges she experienced as a foreigner working in Singapore. She encouraged participants to provide a listening ear to their peers and approach these conversations with sensitivity.

11) Ms Qistina asked how workplace cultures and environments impacted employment opportunities between locals and foreigners.

- Ms Dy Juanco shared that it was largely dependent on the job requirements and individual skill sets, e.g. employers hiring for an overseas market would prioritise foreigners with an understanding of that culture over locals.

12) Participants asked (via Zoom Webinar QnA) about the social stigma around foreign workers in Singapore, and how it could be managed.

- Mr Tay shared that Singaporeans were generally open to having colleagues from foreign countries, with 9 in 10 Singaporeans agreeing on the necessity of foreigners in workplaces. He said that it was important for Singaporeans to embrace collaboration in a globalised economy. He also suggested that organisations could hold training sessions to facilitate the integration of workers into a globalised workspace and alleviate potential tensions.

(iii) Enhancing Local-Foreigner Integration

13) A participant asked (via Zoom Webinar QnA) about different initiatives to help bridge cultural differences and ease the anxiety of foreign students.

- Mr Tay shared that NYC and schools had introduced programmes to help with the integration of foreigners by easing them into local experiences. He said that beyond institutional programmes, local students could also make the effort to provide a listening ear to better understand foreign students.
- Ms Dy Juanco said that Singapore universities had several initiatives to help integrate foreign students and there were local students who would go the extra mile by immersing themselves in different cultural experiences while trying to better understand their peers. She also shared that exchanges of cultures and ideas could happen organically in both formal and informal settings.

14) Participants asked (via Zoom Webinar QnA) about the initiatives promoting integration that had worked in Singapore.

- Mr Tay said that the National Integration Council was set up to look into the issue of integration in Singapore and offered various grants to support ground-up initiatives to promote integration in the community. He also shared that there were non-government organisations, e.g. HealthServe, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), and Migrant Workers' Centre that helped support migrant workers in Singapore.

15) A participant asked (via Zoom Webinar QnA) about the Government's role in supporting integration efforts through availing opportunities to foreigners.

- Mr Tay shared that the Government had to balance of limited resources and infrastructure and also prioritise the needs of Singaporeans. He cited research findings indicating that Singapore, compared to other Southeast Asian countries, remained relatively open to welcoming foreigners. He said that this showed that Singaporeans saw the value of diversity.
- Ms Dy Juanco said that the Government's role was to safeguard the interests of Singaporeans and acknowledged the transparency of the Government in establishing clear standards and measures for foreigners seeking Singaporean citizenship.