Research Paper

Managing Immigration and Integration in Singapore

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Abstract

Singapore is a small city-state situated in the centre of Southeast Asia, and home to five million residents and non-residents. In 2000, a quarter of the Singapore population was considered non-native born. This ratio, by 2010, had increased to one-third of the total population. One million people were added to the population during this period, with the bulk of the influx coming in as permanent residents and short-term foreign workers. The core of local-born Singaporeans has shrunk considerably from 75% to 66% over the same period. This group is set to become the minority group in their homeland, should the trend persist. The rapid growth in population was primarily fuelled by the country’s liberal economic policies, and in reaction to the socio-demographic imperatives faced by the city-state. At the same time, the open-door policy was introduced to uplift the nation’s economic competitiveness and make up for the country’s anaemic fertility rate as the pace of ageing accelerates in the coming decades.

Not surprisingly, the tectonic shift in the demographic landscape has unnerved the local community. Some Singaporeans are uncomfortable over the relentless influx of immigrants and foreign labour. The resentment that underscores the discontent ranges from resource competition (e.g., jobs, education scholarships) to intrinsic socio-cultural contestations (e.g., space, identity, cohesion), and a perceived political divide (e.g., government bias in favour of immigrants over local-born). The policymakers are cognisant of these emerging fractures and many policies have been put in place to address the imbalance. These include steps to recalibrate the intake of foreign labour and long-term residents, ramp up the provision of social infrastructure, impose a residential quota on permanent residents, increase grassroots engagement, and sharpen policy entitlement for the different residential groups. What will the future hold for Singapore’s ethno-cultural terrain? What are the barriers to harmonious co-existence? And what is the trade-off in terms of economic growth and standard of living? This paper aims to examine these issues and identify the impending challenges in the decades to come.

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Introduction

Singapore is historically an immigrant society that has a large number of people originating from abroad. Since the British founding of Singapore in 1819, the tiny island-state has been a magnet for immigrants from the region due to its strategic location at the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula. Good geographical position enabled the former colony to transform into an important trading centre and make economic improvements at breakneck speed.

Despite the economic progress under British rule, the colonial government made no effort to enhance ethnic relations. This lack of attention led to rising social tensions between the different racial communities which eventually ended in a few disruptive racial riots in the 1960s. When Singapore gained independence in 1965, maintaining social peace and harmony was deemed a key priority for the government. Racial integration was taken seriously in all spheres of public policies and every effort was made in the nation-building process to forge a distinctive Singaporean identity which all citizens could identify with and be proud of.

The past experience in the management of racial and religious harmony and in the development of civic health thus became the de facto template for the management of social diversity, including the challenges related to the recent influx of immigrants. While many other countries have also become recipients of immigrants in recent years, Singapore stands out with its comprehensive approach to regulate migration and foster integration into the host society.

Singapore’s Socio-Demographic Landscape

The modern city-state of Singapore has a land size of 714.3 km² (in 2011). The island has no hinterland or natural resources, and is highly dependent on imports and external trade. With a population density of 7,257 persons per km² (in 2011), Singapore is one of the most crowded countries in the world. Notwithstanding its geographic constraints, Singapore has done exceptionally well with its economy – between 1959 and 1991, the gross national product per capita increased more than 14 times (cf. Quah 1992, p. 151-152).

According to the last population census in 2010, Singapore has a total population of 5.08 million inhabitants of which 1.31 million are non-residents (e.g., people holding an Employment Pass) and 3.77 million are residents (including 3.23 million citizens and 541,000 permanent residents (PRs) (see Table 1)). Until the mid-1990s, approximately 90% of the total population were Singapore citizens. This ratio has fallen to less than two-thirds today. However, the ethnic composition has remained relatively stable for the last 40 years. The Chinese form the overwhelming majority with 74.1% of the population. The Malays are the biggest minority group, making up 13.4% of the total population. The Indians form 9.2% of the population and the remaining ethnic groups, known collectively as Others form the last 3.3%. The division of the population into these four groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others, or CMIO for short) can be found in all aspects of society and is crucial for immigration as well as integration policies. Although the CMIO-scheme can be criticised for generalising and neglecting intra-racial differences, the system helps in managing the various ethnic groups and other cultural challenges.

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1 All the data presented in this chapter refer to the results of the 2010 census (cf. WONG 2010) and the information of the Department of Statistics Singapore (http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Singapore’s Population Size, Growth and Composition</th>
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<td>1980</td>
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<td>Total Population (‘000)</td>
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<td>Resident Population</td>
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<td>Permanent Residents</td>
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<td>Non-Resident Population (e.g., Foreigners with Work Permit, Employment Pass, S-pass, Long-Term Social Visit Pass, or Student visas)</td>
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<td>Average Annual Growth (%)</td>
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<td>Resident Population</td>
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<td>Singapore Citizens</td>
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<td>Non-Resident Population</td>
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<td>Ethnic Ratio (100%)</td>
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<td>Chinese</td>
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<td>Malays</td>
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<td>Indians</td>
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<td>Others</td>
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Source: Singapore Census Reports; Wong (2010), edited by Patrick Rueppel

Singapore is not only a multi-racial society, but also a multi-religious one. Buddhism is the most common religion with 33.3% of the population. Christianity, with 18.3% of the population, is becoming more important. Muslims (14.7%), Taoists (10.9%) and Hindus (5.1%) account for the other religious blocs. (cf. Linnarz, 2011, p. 106).

In order not to discriminate against any of the four major ethnic groups, there are four official languages: Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and English. While the lyrics of the national anthem are kept in Malay to show respect to pre-colonial heritage, all signboards and official announcements are made in all four languages. English is the official inter-ethnic lingua franca as it enables the different races to communicate with one another. At the same time, immigrants and foreigners from all over the world can also participate in Singapore’s multicultural society without much difficulty.

**Overview of the Driving Forces that Underscore Singapore’s Immigration Policy**

Singapore’s multicultural landscape and immigrant policies need to be understood within the larger historical context. After the end of the Second World War, Singapore reverted to its colonial outpost status for the British (1945-1963) and then briefly became a part of the Malayan Federation (1963-1965) comprising Peninsula Malaysia, the Sabah state, and Singapore. Singapore became an independent state in 1965 when the city was expelled by the Malayan Federal government for spreading racial unrest to other parts of Malaya (cf. Lau, 1998). With no natural resources and a population of barely three million people who were mostly poor and unskilled, the prognosis for the then-650 km$^2$ nation was bleak. How did Singapore leap from a third- to a first-world economy with one of the world’s highest per-capita income$^2$ in one generation? The success factors are a combination of perseverance, strategic geography, and visionary leadership.

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As a small, open and vulnerable city-state, Singapore had no choice but to embed itself in the larger global economic system to survive and to prosper. The Republic started as a humble trading port for regional commerce but constantly reinvented itself to move up the economic value chain. Singapore has, over the years, attracted a sizeable amount of foreign direct investments in various sectors such as manufacturing, information-communication technology, engineering, financial services, biomedical sciences, and hospitality. The changing façades of the industries moved in tandem with the level of affluence and educational aspirations of a maturing population.

Singapore’s economic miracle owes a lot to the far-sighted stewardship of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister, and the governing People’s Action Party which has garnered more than two-third majority seats in the parliament since 1963. Lee and other policymakers are firm believers in a market-driven economy and Singapore’s growth model is quintessentially entrenched in pragmatic, neo-Keynesian principles. Keeping an open-door policy, promoting export-oriented industries, and ramping up factors of production are the key ingredients of success (cf. Yeung & Olds, 2004, p. 507-513). This approach has served the city-state well and has enabled it to leapfrog its geographic limitations and transcend the organic confines of a small state, one of which is the lack of adequate manpower and talent.

Singapore’s economy however, reached full employment in the late 1970s (cf. Yeung, 1973, p.162) and for more than 30 years, the Republic has had to import foreign labour at every level of the skills ladder to complement its domestic workforce. From the economic point of view, a liberal foreign manpower policy is not only vital to sustaining the country’s growth momentum; it has also proved to be critical in maintaining the country’s economic competitiveness, especially in the development of new growth sectors and/or industries. The progression up the economic value chain could not have been achieved without the contribution from overseas talent.

In the globalised political economy, Singapore faces a challenge that is common for all small states – how can it remain competitive and be useful to the international community? Situated between the two emerging giants of China and India, there is a perennial concern that the city-state will be bypassed by the rest of the world. For the Republic to uphold and uplift its current standard of living, a strong and dynamic workforce is vital, as well as a flexible immigrant and foreign worker regime.

The insatiable demand for foreign labour is reflected in recent demographic contours. According to the population census reports, there were just 60,000 non-residents in 1970, comprising the expatriate communities, dependent pass holders, and transient employees who work in menial, low-paying, or risky jobs that Singaporeans shun. The size of the non-residents category has since doubled over every 10 years and by 2010, the figure had swelled to 1.3 million, or approximate 26% of the total population (see Table 1).

The trend for permanent residents (PRs) mimics the stratospheric rise in the transient non-residents group. The number of PRs has doubled every decade since 1980, and by 2010, it reached a record 540,000, or 11% of the total population. Notwithstanding this rapid influx, the rate of new approved PRs has endured a dramatic swing in recent years due to the tightening of foreign labour intake. Between 2001 and 2008, an average of 49,000 applications for permanent residency was approved, rising to a peak of almost 80,000 new PRs in 2008 (see Table 2). Subsequently, the numbers have dipped to no more than 28,000 in 2011. The take-up rate for Singapore citizenship follows a similar pattern, peaking in 2008, and tapering off in the following years (see Table 2).
From the economic point of view, the liberal immigration policies have paid off handsomely for the city-state. Singapore was ranked as the most liveable city in Asia by the accounting firm PwC (cf. The Straits Times, Oct 11, 2012). It was also praised for the ease of doing business and for its infrastructure quality. Singapore is also known as Asia’s top destination for business meetings and conferences, as evident by the top tourism accolade it received from the World Travel Awards for 2012 (cf. The Straits Times, Oct 19, 2012). The awards are testament to how a well-calibrated and talent-centric labour policy can uplift living standards for a small and vulnerable nation-state like Singapore.

Table 2: Immigration Trend

![Immigration Trend Graph]

Source: Dept of Statistics, Singapore

Residential Classifications and the Appropriation of State Resources

Taking an overarching view of the ebb and flow of international labour, the liberal immigration and foreign worker policies are part of a broader market-driven economic framework. Singapore is rebranding itself as a global business hub, an incubation city for arts, culture and education, and a centre of excellence for innovation and enterprise. This aspiration is supported by a repertoire of residential and work visas catering to different segments of business and household needs.

To begin with, Work Permits (WP)\(^3\) are issued for foreigners at the lowest end of the skills ladder, with the bulk of them performing tedious jobs Singaporeans shun, such as those in the construction sector and in domestic care giving. The Special Pass, or S-pass for short, is the next level of entry. This applies to the mid-level skilled foreigners holding at least a diploma, a degree or technical qualifications. The S-pass is primarily designed to meet labour shortages for mid-level executives and frontline staff such as those in the Food and Beverage industry. At the highest end of the qualification ladder are the holders of Employment Pass (EP), comprising professionals, managers, specialists, and senior executives with recognised qualifications and years of work experience.

The categorisation of skills and work visas is closely tied to the entitlement and rights of the individual, their eligibility for permanent residency, and at a macro-level, an indication of whether they are deemed to be suitable long-term inhabitants of the island-state. Under the current regime, WP and S-Pass holders are not entitled to any form of social welfare, nor are

\(^3\) Ministry of Manpower, Passes and Visas, accessed via http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes- visas/Pages/default.aspx
they allowed to bring in their dependents (with some exceptions). Most of them are also not eligible for residency application.

Foreign workers in the WP category are also treated differently according to the industries of employment. Unskilled foreign workers in the construction sector, for instance, are mostly housed in temporary living quarters or workplace dormitories located far away from residential estates. On the other hand, foreigners on EP may sponsor their dependents to live in Singapore, but this option is generally not applicable to S-Pass holders and certainly not to employees on WP visas.

Compared to WP and S-pass holders, those employed under the EP scheme are considered “more valuable” and are treated better than other categories of non-residents. While EP holders are not entitled to any state benefits, this segment of the foreign population is often seen as an intermediate step to gaining permanent residency. The PRs, on the other hand, are entitled to some form of state support and privileges, including access to medical and educational subsidies, and public housing ownership. PRs however, do not have equal rights as citizens; they do not have political voting rights and their entitlement is always pegged at a notch lower than that for citizens. Second-generation PRs are also legally mandated to serve a 2-year military conscription, just as citizens do.

Overall, the sharp policy differentiation is aimed at regulating the influx of foreign labour and long-term residents. The stratification provides policymakers a framework to channel manpower resources to selected industries and for different purposes. This helps to supplement the existing industries when the need arises as well as shorten the learning curve in developing new growth sectors.

It should be emphasised that comprehensive data regarding the profile of immigrants and foreign workers in Singapore is either unavailable in the public domain, or is notoriously difficult to find. There is very little public information on the detailed breakdown in terms of ethnicity, country of origin, sectors of employment, and other nuanced criteria for long-term residential application. The opaque outlook stems from the policymakers’ concern that the players may “game” the system if enough information is made publicly available on the criteria for work and residential applications.

**Open-Door Policy as a Whole-of-Government Approach**

The staggering influx of immigrants and transient labour is not the outcome of a single isolated policy but the effect of a larger economic blueprint to achieving the renaissance city goal. The tectonic shift in the demographic landscape is a side effect of the global city aspiration, and it illustrates the trade-off between economic competitiveness and population management. For Singapore to be an influential city of the world, a wide-ranging approach is required.

Indeed, in addition to various categories of employment visas, a plethora of strategic initiatives are in place to bring the world closer to Singapore. Examples of these measures include the Regional and Global Headquarters (RHQ and IHQ) Awards, Global Investor Programme (GIP), Global Schoolhouse initiative, Foreign Sports Talent (FST) Scheme, and

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overseas scholarships for non-Singaporeans. The business HQ awards are designed to attract multinational corporations (MNCs) to relocate their regional or global HQ operations in Singapore and cement the Republic’s status as an Asian business hub. Besides the contribution from increased tax revenue, the presence of these HQs would also inject greater diversity and dynamism to the texture of the labour force as they are likely to relocate some of their senior executives to Singapore from the overseas base. This would result in a more cosmopolitan, vibrant, and global-oriented work-force.

The Global Investor Programme operates with a similar objective in mind – to welcome international investors with a good business or entrepreneurial track record to sink their roots in the city-state (Refer to GIP factsheet). Foreign nationals who are keen to set up or invest in a Singapore-based business worth at least $2.5 million will have their application for permanent residency fast-tracked.

The Global Schoolhouse project was part of a 2002 strategic economic work plan to develop and transform the education sector to become an engine of growth for Singapore (cf. Sidhu, Ho, & Yeoh, 2011, p.259-261). The vision is consistent with the city-state’s objective to divert its economic reliance on the manufacturing industry to a more service-oriented economy. The ambitious project aims to bring in 150,000 full-fee paying international students and 100,000 international corporate executives on training by the year 2015. Suffice to say, the presence of the sojourners is designed to nurture the multicultural learning environment in schools and in the workplace.

Singapore’s ambition to reinvent itself is not confined to the economy, as it also aspires to become a nation of great sportsmen. This goal is best exemplified in the Foreign Sports Talent Scheme. First conceived in 1993, the goal was to boost local sports excellence and to facilitate the development of a sports culture. The Singapore Table Tennis Association was the first to adopt the scheme, followed by other fraternities like football and athletics. Under the scheme, young and promising overseas sportsmen are offered citizenship to compete for Singapore in prestigious international sports events. It is assumed that winning sports medals can be a source of national pride and a unifying force for all Singaporeans. And medals were indeed won. Singapore earned itself a silver medal for women’s table tennis team in the 2008 Beijing Olympics Games, and two bronze medals at the 2012 London Olympics. Both winning contingents were fielded by an all-exclusive immigrant team.

Lastly, there is a wide range of scholarships offered to foreigners to study and work in the Republic. These include the ASEAN scholarships and Ministry of Education Scholarships for non-Singaporean residents. Until recently, up to 20% of places in the local universities were set aside for international students, with many of them receiving tuition waivers and guaranteed accommodation. In return for receiving government-funded education, the foreign beneficiaries are required to serve a working bond of up to six years upon graduation, thereby increasing the supply of manpower to meet the tight labour market. For the scholarship recipients, it is viewed as an assured employment visa in-waiting.

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6 Contact Singapore, Global Investor Programme, accessed via http://www.contactsingapore.sg/Library/1/Pages/1191/GIP%20Factsheet%20EN%2020%20Oct%202012.pdf
Many of these measures are not unique to Singapore and similar initiatives, like the GIP, can be found in other developed economics. But the Singapore open-door policy and its targeted results are surprisingly audacious in terms of scope and the scale of implementation. For an island-state with a land size of barely 700 square km, the infrastructure required to support 250,000 international students and executives on training is a stretch on resources. Likewise, for Singapore to set aside 20% of tertiary enrolment for international students (most of them on scholarships paid for by the taxpayers) when less than 30% of every native-birth cohort (as at 2011) is offered a place to study in the publicly-funded universities is politically difficult to justify to the local population. More importantly, unlike other global cities such as London, New York, and Paris, Singapore is both a metropolitan city and a nation state. While liberal and talent-centric immigration policies are the quintessential ingredients for success in global cities, these priorities are usually balanced by other social objectives for the country as a whole.

Open-Door Policy to Mitigate the Silver Tsunami

Economic competitiveness is not the only factor that underlies Singapore’s strong reliance on foreign labour and immigration. The obsession with population is also driven by the concern of an impending demographic “Silver Tsunami” when the baby boomers retire in the coming decades. The concern over senior citizens leaving the workforce en masse is compounded by low population fertility rate in the last 20 years.

The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) – defined as the number of children born to a woman – has steadily declined since the late 1970s (see Table 3). The TFR was 3.07 in 1970 and 1.15 in 2010 (cf. National Population and Talent Division’s paper on Marriage and Parenthood Trends in Singapore). It was a norm four decades ago for married couples to have at least three or more children. Today, the average size of the household has shrunk considerably even as more Singaporeans are now choosing to remain single. Singaporeans are also living better and healthier due to improvements in public health services. The average life expectancy has increased from 65.8 years in 1970 to 81.7 years in 2010 (see Table 3).

Demographically, a TFR of at least 2.1 is required for the population to be self-sustaining (cf. previous footnote). A persistently low TFR will have severe economic repercussions, including a drain on the nation’s financial reserves to fund burgeoning social programmes for the aged. The impact of this demographic conundrum has already been felt in the old-age support ratio, determined by the number of working-age adults in support of each retiree who is at least 65 years old. In 1970, there were 17 working-age adults to one elderly Singaporean. Forty years later, the ratio has plummeted to 8.2 people and is projected to spiral down to fewer than three working adults in 2050 if the trend persists. Enlarging the pool of labour and immigrants became an obvious albeit short-term solution to the complex problem.


10 See footnote 8
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<tr>
<td>Total Fertility Rate</td>
<td>3.07</td>
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<td>Males</td>
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<td>74.7</td>
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<td>80.0</td>
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(Source: Population Trends 2012, Department of Statistics Ministry of Trade and Industry)

Resentment on the Ground

As an historical immigrant society, Singapore has always been known to many foreigners as a hospitable and inclusive host society. Singapore is also home to many MNCs and non-profit organisations, and their presence has created numerous jobs for the local economy and infused dynamism and vibrancy to the otherwise squeaky clean city-state. As such, it is ironic that some Singaporeans feel uncomfortable with the influx of foreigners. It is also challenging to identify the precise period in time where immigration came to be regarded as a problem. One could argue, from available statistics, that the discourse began in the mid-1990s when permanent residency was offered to foreigners at the rate of 30,000 persons per annum (cf. Koh, March 22, 1997). This is a significant rate, given that it represents 1% of the total citizen population in the 1990s.

As a result of the rapid influx of new immigrants and foreign workers, the demographic landscape of Singapore has shifted dramatically over the last 20 years. Not only has the ratio of Singapore citizens decreased, but while the citizen population has expanded by 1.7 times, the pool of non-residents and PRs has collectively increased 9.3 times.

The relentless increase in non-native residents, especially among PRs and transient labour, has led to heated debates on issues related to immigration, integration, and the meaning of citizenship. The groundswell of discomfort can be heard from a wide spectrum of sources, including opinion polls, media reports, and online forums. The unease in the immigrant discourse is also extensively covered by the international media.\[11\]

On the economic front, some Singaporeans feel that their job security has been compromised as they now have to compete harder with foreigners, be they transient workers or naturalised citizens; students and parents are unhappy with the large number of scholarships and university places allocated to international students; and foreigners are often blamed for causing runaway home prices, traffic congestion and breakdown in public infrastructure.\[12\] As at the 3\(^{rd}\) quarter of 2012, the prices for resale public housing have increased by more than 95% compared to the same period in 2005. The stratospheric increase in housing prices coincided with the unfettered influx of immigrants and foreign workers between 2005 and 2009 (cf. Resale Price Index, [http://www.hdb.gov.sg](http://www.hdb.gov.sg) and Table 2).

On the socio-cultural front, the presence of large groups of foreigners is seen to have affected social cohesion and devalued the status of citizenship. Although many new immigrants and transient workers share similar ethno-cultural origins as the forefathers of the native-born citizens (e.g., ethnic Chinese and Indians), their social norms and behaviours are dissimilar to

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the ones now practised by the local native communities. Singaporeans feel that their status as native-born citizens has been displaced by the burgeoning number of foreigners. The challenges are further compounded by the fact that some recent immigrants are either ignorant of the local taboos or unaccustomed to living in a multicultural environment, and are seen as disrespectful towards local hosts. The lack of English language proficiency is also a barrier for interaction between the non-English speaking immigrants and the ethnic minorities.

More importantly, there is a lingering perception that the government treats foreigners better than native-born citizens. Singaporean men, for instance, feel disadvantaged because they have to serve a two-year military conscription whereas first-generation immigrants are exempted (cf. Leong, May 10, 2012). The resentment is further compounded by opaque immigration policies and the lack of public consultation.

For some Singaporeans, the animosity reflects a deeper sense of insecurity, a perceived lack of social safety net, and an enduring stereotype of PRs using Singapore as a springboard to other developed economies. The sentiments were noted in recent and past opinion polls: 73.2% of Singaporeans believed “job opportunities will be reduced for local-born Singaporeans if we have more immigrants”; 55.8% agreed that the “government attracted immigrants to Singapore at the expense of local-born citizens” (cf. Leong, in press); and 63% of Singaporeans agreed or strongly agreed that “The policy to attract more foreign talent will weaken Singapore’s feeling as one people, one nation” (cf. Tan & Koh, 2009).

A survey by The Sunday Times six years ago (January 14, 2007) reported that 86% of respondents feared that foreigners will “take away jobs from Singaporeans”; 65% believed foreigners “enjoy all the privileges living in Singapore but (accepted) none of the responsibilities”; and 43% thought that “the Government cares more for foreign talent than Singaporeans”. Simmering tensions over the erosion of the Singaporean identity and status has built up over the years, as Singaporeans feel increasingly threatened by the unabated influx of immigrants and transient labour.

In January 2013, the National Population and Talent Division, the government unit that oversees population affairs within the Prime Minister’s Office (cf. http://www.nptd.gov.sg), released the White Paper entitled “A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore”. It sets out key strategies and a roadmap for Singapore’s population policies to address current demographic challenges. Several main themes were featured, including the retention of a Singaporean core through the regulation of approving new citizens and permanent residents, the creation of jobs and opportunities for Singaporeans and the maintenance of strong infrastructure to create “a good home” for all. There was a public uproar over the projected population figure of 6.9 million by 2030. The White Paper was deemed to be “shocking and disappointing”, especially since immigration

14 In the Singapore migration discourse, the term “foreign talent” is sometimes used interchangeably with “immigrant”. It refers to high-skilled workers becoming PRs, new citizens, and expatriates, i.e., non-native. Low-skilled workers are labelled as “foreign workers” which shows even a linguistic division between the groups.
policies had already been fiercely debated since the last election in 2011. Additionally, the projected figures of taking in 15,000 to 25,000 new citizens per year to boost the declining total fertility rate (TFR) caused many to question if the trade-offs between economic growth and population expansion were worthwhile.\textsuperscript{18} Chief grouses included a deteriorating quality of life arising from a higher cost of living and widening income disparity.\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, there was a sense that structural and social consequences of the current population increase, such as overcrowding, higher prices and job competition, had not been thoroughly addressed. Many Singaporeans felt that the White Paper was dismissive of public opinion, and further indication that the government could not be trusted. This wave of resentment culminated in a public protest, which was attended by over 4,000 people.\textsuperscript{20} Among the issues raised were the lack of public consultation, as well as questions over what constitutes a Singaporean core and how this would affect the future of Singapore.\textsuperscript{21}

Response from the Government

The simmering tension and resentment toward foreigners have not gone unnoticed. Singapore’s policymakers have adopted a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to bridge the foreign-local schism. In line with the government’s approach in managing complex social problems, this is also how Singapore tackled racial and religious divisions in the 1960s. The social integration mandate is currently overseen and coordinated by the National Population and Talent Division, which falls under the purview of the Prime Minister’s Office. All ministerial agencies are expected to work together closely to ensure that the policies and programmes are implemented effectively on the ground.

On the whole, the state’s response to bridging the affective divide can be classified along six fundamental thrusts: (1) Influx calibration, (2) Provision of infrastructure and social security, (3) Policy differentiation, (4) Housing policies as an instrument for integration, (5) Promoting grassroots activism, and (6) Leveraging on identity policies. The six-prong strategy focuses on the key problem areas observed in the integration discourse and serves as a guiding framework in the formulation of public policies.

1. **Calibrating Influx of Immigrants and Transient Workers**

In response to the groundswell of resentment and the watershed 2011 General Election where the incumbent People’s Action Party received the lowest popular votes post-Independence, a slew of changes were made to regulate the entry of immigrants and foreign workers. The minimum qualifying salary for the S-Pass and the Employment Pass work visas were raised in July 2011: from a monthly income of S$1,800 to S$2,000 for S-Pass holders, and from S$2,500 to S$2,800 for EP employees. The criteria for EP were further revised within the year, with the minimum monthly income going up to S$3,000, and a further tightening of educational qualifications requirement.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} “4,000 protest against White Paper” by Asia One, accessed via http://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20130217-402603.html
\item \textsuperscript{21} “6.9 million people and an emotional hump” by Calvin Cheng, published Feb 20, 2013 on Singapolitics, accessed via http://www.singapolitics.sg/views/69-million-people-and-emotional-hump
\end{itemize}
With effect from September 2012, non-resident workers face tighter restrictions in bringing in their spouses, children and extended families. Only S-Pass and EP holders who earn at least $4,000 may sponsor their spouses and children to stay in Singapore; and EP holders with a minimum income of S$8,000 are entitled to sponsor their parents. Prior to this, all S-Pass holders who earn more than $2,800 and EP holders could bring in their spouses and children. The new measures are meant to curb population growth as the infrastructure struggles to support the growing number of people on the island.

In addition to the qualifying criteria for work visas, there is also a marked reduction in the number of foreigners granted permanent residency and citizenship since 2009 (see Table 2). The calibration of entry curbs the ‘demand’ side of the equation, by ensuring a more sustainable rate of population growth.

2. **Provision of Basic Infrastructure and the Broadening of Social Security**

This principle addresses the perceived sense of insecurity by stepping up the provision of social infrastructure to cope with the rising demand for public services. The urgency to enhance basic amenities can be seen in the building and retrofitting of railway lines (cf. Singapore Budget, 2012), construction of new hospitals (cf. Lim & Lee, 2012), widening of roads (cf. Singapore Budget, 2011), state subsidisation for a new fleet of bus services (cf. Musfirah, February 17, 2012), and a ramping up of public housing supply (cf. Ramesh & Tan, September 27, 2012).

In addition to enhancing the physical capacity, the social support system has been broadened to engender a greater sense of security and assurance for the citizenry. This includes making healthcare more affordable and accessible (cf. Lim & Lee, 2012), providing greater support for childcare, eldercare, and families with special needs children (cf. Ministry of Education, March 8, 2012; Ministry of Health, February 20, 2012; Ministry of Social and Family Services, August 13, 2012), and allowing a larger percentage of Singaporeans the opportunity to earn a degree from publicly-funded universities (cf. Ministry of Education, August 28, 2012).

By enhancing the quality and quantity of public infrastructure, and by putting in place a more robust social safety net, the intended outcome is to encourage Singaporeans to be more inclusive towards foreigners. Such measures are aimed at building greater confidence and deeper psychological resources for Singaporeans to deal with competition from the influx of immigrants.

3. **“Singaporeans First”: Policy Differentiation between Citizens, PRs, and Non-Residents**

Beyond upgrading social infrastructure, policymakers are actively encouraging qualified non-Singapore residents and permanent residents to sink their roots in the Republic. Using a “Singaporeans First” approach, the intention is to differentiate the amount of benefits accruing to different categories of citizens, PRs and non-residents. As a rule of thumb, citizens are entitled to receive more state subsidies and given priority in policy administration vis-à-vis PRs; and PRs, in turn, receive more support compared to non-residents. Ostensibly, non-residents and PRs will be motivated to apply for residency and citizenship if they stand to

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22 See Ministry of Manpower, Employment Pass – Before you apply (Guidelines) 
gain financially from the conversion. This distinction has, over the last few years, been gradually sharpened in favour of the citizen population.

The strategic thrust percolates all public sectors and this paradigm of thinking is evident across a wide spectrum of social, economic, and educational policies. Singapore citizens, for instance, have absolute priority over PRs and non-residents in the enrolment of their children to their preferred primary school; enjoy greater healthcare and education subsidies; are eligible to purchase a subsidised flat directly from the Housing Development Board at a significant market-rate discount; and have the political rights to vote and to stand in national elections. The residential distinction serves more than just a reward for taking up Singapore residency. It also reassures Singaporeans that the interest of the citizenry lies at the heart of policymaking.

4. Building Mutual Trust Through Housing Policies

In order to appreciate how housing policies influence harmonious social relations, it is important to know the backdrop of Singapore’s residential landscape. The two defining hallmarks of public housing policies in Singapore are: (1) Relative affordability, and (2) High levels of home ownership. These two characteristics are unique features in Singapore society as much as they are exemplars of nation-building success. Based on the Population Census Report in 2010, 87.2% of all residential households in Singapore are homeowners with the large majority, or approximately 80%, residing in public housing built by the Housing Development Board (HDB), a statutory board under the purview of the Ministry of National Development (cf. Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010).

This remarkable achievement is a quintessential feature of the social compact between the state and the people. Singaporeans who are gainfully employed are promised state support to help them become homeowners. This is made possible with the plethora of social assistance schemes such as priority allocation of units, special subsidies, utilisation of retirement savings for mortgage repayment, and a low interest rate. These policies collectively ensure that quality housing remains affordable for the masses. The idea behind home ownership is that people will have a feeling of belonging, a home they can identify with and a sense of rootedness. This makes them stakeholders in Singapore and gives them something to fight for here (cf. Yuen, 2005, p.16-17; Zur Lienen, 2002, p. 5).

The public housing programme does not just aim to provide affordable accommodation; it also strives to promote a harmonious and cohesive living environment, integrating residents socially and spatially, and forging a communal identity at the same time (cf. Siddique, 1993, p. 45). In the immediate post-Second World War years, Singapore’s housing landscape was characterised by the existence of strong, separated ethnic enclaves, segregated along socio-economic lines. The spatial segregation was a potential breeding ground for conflict and was believed to be one of the causes in the violent racial riots during the 1950s and 1960s (cf. Mutalib 2004, p. 59; Ooi, 1993, p.10; Van Grunsven, 2000, p. 120). One objective of the HDB policy is to break up ethnic enclaves and enhance social integration through a spatial mixture of the races in public residences. The management of ethnic relations through residential integration follows the belief that a spatial mixture will lead to more contact between races which would then result in greater awareness for other cultures, religions and norms (cf. Mutalib 2004, p. 55, 59-60; Ooi, 1993, p. 6, 10-11).

With this in mind, the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) was introduced in 1989, which requires the ethnic composition for each block of HDB flat and the surrounding neighbourhood to
follow the national ethnic ratio (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others categories) as closely as practicable (see Table 4, on ethnic ratio in each block and neighbourhood). This ensures that no single-race blocks exist and residents interact with people of other races in their daily commute (cf. Yuen, 2005, p. 10-11). The policy effectively ended the spatial concentration of races and social segregation in public housing. Each block now represents a small microcosm of Singapore. The EIP is thus in line with the goals of the HDB policy to foster greater tolerance and understanding (cf. Lai, 1995, p. 122; Ooi, 1993, p. 4-15, 20; Siddique, 1993, p. 47; Sim, et. al, 2003, p. 297).

More importantly, EIP forms the de facto integration framework to enhance intercultural relations and social harmony in the home environment. In March 2010, a new residential quota for Singapore PRs was introduced for HDB estates. This policy is intended to prevent the formation of new immigrant enclaves, given the tendency of PRs from the same nationality to congregate in HDB flats which are increasingly becoming more popular among foreigners. Under the new policy, each block of HDB flats shall not have more than 8% of non-Malaysian PR households, and within a given precinct, not more than 5%. Malaysian PRs are exempt from the quota as they are culturally similar to Singaporeans and hence, the threat of an ethnic-national enclave is less of a concern. Given that there are now more than half a million PRs, representing nearly 15% of the total resident population, there is a political imperative to ensure that new immigrants blend in well within the home environment.

While studies (e.g., Lai, 1995; Rueppel, 2011) have indicated that successful integration among the races and between foreigners and locals are not always guaranteed under EIP and PR residential quota, a mixture between native-born and naturalised residents is, at the very least, a pre-requisite condition for intercultural contact to take place. From the perspective of policymakers, racial or nationality quota remains one of the main tools to achieve a cohesive, multi-ethnic society in Singapore, and is consistent with “the state’s policy of nation-building based on multiracialism” (Lai, 1995, p. 18), as a result of which people have developed a preference for multi-racial living.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Block Limit</th>
<th>Neighbourhood Limit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>87 %</td>
<td>84 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians/Others</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ethnic ‘Indians’ & ‘Others’ form one category in the EIP due to their small population.


5. Grassroots Activism

There are many types of community-driven, grassroots organisations in Singapore. In view of the scope and limitation of this chapter, the paper will focus solely on government-linked grassroots bodies. These are volunteer committees located in the housing estates coordinated by the People’s Association – a statutory board under the purview of the Ministry of Social and Family Development – to build social capital and promote neighbourliness. Grassroots members typically stay in the same estate that they serve and regard themselves as facilitators for neighbourhood interactions. They serve as a conduit of exchange between policymakers and residents, and in particular, between the Member of Parliament and the electorates that come under his or her ward. The grassroots outreach programmes are performed mainly through block parties, recreational programmes, house visits, and periodical town hall meetings with political office holders and ministry representatives.
Grassroots activism is a cornerstone to promoting social interactions between people of different ethno-national origins. Within the broader nation-building narrative, the grassroots movement is seen as a state-funded apparatus to advance inter-racial understanding, minimise social fractures, and reinforce social resilience and trust between residents from different backgrounds. Many grassroots measures that promote integration are also closely connected to the HDB policy, where they aim to complement spatial integration and foster social communal bonding within the neighbourhoods. Most of the grassroots entities are assigned ownership to some kind of provincial facilities, such as the Resident Committee Centres and Community Clubs, where they serve as common touch points for the residents. These centres and clubs offer an affordable range of programmes for everyone, including social and academic enrichment classes for school pupils, interest groups, and the elderly. Moreover, there are sporting and recreational amenities that are available for public rental, some of which could be used for special occasions such as marriage and festive dinners. Overall, the multi-racial grassroots movement offers an inclusive platform for the different ethno-cultural groups to engage each other and consequently foster greater intercultural participation and appreciation.

Beyond local grassroots activism, there are grassroots-driven national initiatives that encourage foreign-local interactions. The National Integration Council (NIC) is an example. The Council was established in April 2009 to foster foreign-local integration and it is under the purview of the National Population and Talent Division. The NIC consists of four working groups, with each addressing a different facet of the integration discourse, namely Community, Media, Schools and Workplace relations. The role of the NIC is mainly that of an enabler. It aims to create a collegial climate that bridges the foreign-local chasm, by building a sustainable and active network for social integration, and facilitating both foreigners and locals to internalise Singapore’s core values. The NIC is presided by a governing board consisting of eminent professionals and public intellectuals.

NIC also provides financial assistance in the form of the Community Integration Fund (CIF) for projects that enhance intercultural understanding. Singapore-registered organisations and companies registered with the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority of Singapore (ACRA) may apply for up to S$200,000 from the CIF. Under the CIF, up to 80% of project costs can be co-funded after approval by a panel of four NIC members (cf. National Integration Council, 2012).

To further strengthen immigrants’ commitment to the Republic, the Singapore Citizenship Journey was launched in February 2011 to formalise the citizenship conversion exercise. All new applicants for Singapore citizenship are required to complete an induction programme prior to finalising their citizenship. The Singapore Citizenship Journey consists of three compulsory components: First, an online learning portal that introduces Singapore history, its political system, national symbols, and the major races and culture. Second, the Singapore Experiential Tour requires prospective new citizens to visit the important historical sites in Singapore to gain first-hand experience on the ground. Third, a Community Sharing Session in which new citizens will meet and interact with the local grassroots leaders and volunteers to learn about life in a multi-racial environment and the various possibilities for participation in the community. The Singapore Citizenship Journey offers a comprehensive induction programme to the new immigrants as it promulgates the different facades of societal norms, values and ethos embraced by the majority of Singaporeans.
Identity Policies, a View from the Top

Like all other young sovereign nations, Singapore seeks to forge a distinct national identity that every citizen can identify with and be proud of. At the same time, the city-state is cognisant that historical and cultural identities (such as race, language and religion) are important psychological markers of heritage, and the discourse on integration and belongingness cannot be divorced from these personal attributes. As much as immigrants are expected to abide by the local cultural norms and embrace the shared values and local national identity, they are also encouraged to hold on to their heritage, be that of racial, linguistic, or religious identities (cf. Rueppel 2011, p. 41). The majority of Singaporeans are not looking for hegemonic assimilation, but an overlapping identity that emphasises positive engagement with the host community and the retention of original heritage culture (cf. Leong, in press).

Cultural maintenance and national rootedness are therefore not antagonistic but mutually complementary. Empirically, the two dimensions are positively correlated as a high degree of ethnic affiliation is matched with a strong sense of connectedness to the nation-state (cf. Ward and Leong, 2006). Social policies such as the EIP are thus not incompatible with the broader objective of foreign-local integration – a society that celebrates multi-racialism, and one that is confident and proud of its ethnic heritage and diversity will also engender an inclusive and tolerant attitude towards foreigners.

In addition to the identity of multi-racialism, there is another unique though inconspicuous social institution that quietly lends itself to the fostering of a strong Singaporean core – the conscription policy, otherwise known as National Service (NS). All male Singapore citizens and second-generation PRs are mandated by law to serve in a regimental unit for a period of two years full-time, during which they will receive military training and be immersed in ethos that emphasises collective interest above the self. The enlistment policy has been in place since 1967 and it is widely recognised as a rite of passage for Singapore men and their families. Both anecdotal and empirical evidence indicate that fulfilling the NS obligation is a critical marker of identity and integration, especially within the context of acculturation (cf. Goh & Chow, Oct 23, 2012; Leong, in press; May 10, 2012). There is little argument that NS forges a sense of camaraderie between immigrants and their local-born compatriots; it is a common social denominator and a hallmark of the Singapore identity. Immigrants who embrace the NS institution can better appreciate Singapore’s social terrain and become a full participating member of the community.

Whither Integration?

Singapore’s immigration and integration approach represents a good mixture of hard (recalibrate influx of foreigners, HDB ethnic and PR quotas) and soft (grassroots activities, identity politics) factors, both of which are complementary and closely intertwined. While some of the impacts are easily measureable (e.g., PR ratio in HDB estates), the mindset and attitudes of people are difficult to analyse (e.g., immigrant perceptions and social inclusiveness). The topic on integration is a current political hot potato and Singapore’s policymakers are only too aware of the challenges at stake. This provides a strong impetus for a comprehensive approach in managing migration and integration.

Although most policies that are in place have gained some traction and are poised to accomplish the intended objectives, there is clearly room for policy refinement. Firstly, the current discourse has given excessive attention to the politics of comparison. Using the “Singaporeans First” principle has engendered the impression that Singaporeans receive more
state subsidies, and are accorded higher status and priority than PRs and non-residents. While some form of positive differentiation is inevitable, there is a concern of over-reliance in using this framework to promote integration. In certain instances, the differences in policy has ironically reinforced rather bridged the “us-versus-them” divide. Similarly, while the EIP and PR quota has contributed to strengthening communal bonding, the differences in racial and residential status should not be over-emphasised. It may be advisable to switch from a narrative that centres on diversity towards one that stresses on what people have in common.

Secondly, non-government linked grassroots organisations should take the lead in driving engagement between new immigrants and native-born residents. Many of the current initiatives are managed by the People’s Association-led committees. While these are exemplar event organisers, there is a perception that policymakers are trying to bring them into their fold for political gains. Non-government linked civil societies, including the ethno-cultural associations and religion-based organisations can do more to facilitate interactions. In the same vein, the recently introduced Singapore Citizenship Journey is a good project which could be broadened. Besides applicants for citizenship who are co-opted in this initiative, those who have applied for permanent residency should also be required to learn about Singapore and attend such learning events before being granted PR status. Furthermore, applicants for citizenship should be made to pass a written test on aspects of Singapore’s history, political system and values.

Finally, there is a need to re-visit the current strategic framework used for achieving economic growth – in particular, balancing the trade-off between growth and the maintenance of social harmony. The tensions that have surfaced in recent years are mainly the products of yesteryears’ policies where the emphasis was tilted towards economic growth rather than labour productivity or social inclusion. As the economy matures and available resources in public infrastructure and amenities operate at the maximum capacity, there is increasing socio-political pressure to focus on social cohesion rather than the economic imperatives. Policymakers will have to be discerning and re-examine their priorities in light of these challenges.

In summary, Singapore’s approach to bridging the foreign-local schism has proven to be successful and could be emulated by other countries. Firstly, the holistic, whole-of-government approach has enhanced intergroup understanding and harmony at all levels of society, and this in turn helps to reduce distrust among the diverse communities. Secondly, confronting locals with foreigners in a tension-free environment and at an early stage will helped to foster understanding and reduce prejudices. Thirdly, community activities at the local level have enabled people to get to know foreigners as neighbours rather than as strangers and vice-versa. Fourthly, governments have to establish certain rules that everybody has to respect and make immigrants aware of these rules through measures such as the Citizenship Journey programme. With the interweaving of international economies, transnational labour movement is set to be the norm rather than the exception. Singapore can be a role model in this area of governance.

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**List of References**


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