



Policy Notes



PPCEUMI Policy Brief 3: Singaporean Migration and Integration Policy

On 19 March 2019, the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet network Policy, Politics, Culture: EU Migration and Integration (PPCEUMI) hosted a Migration Policy Dialogue at the National University of Singapore entitled 'Immigration Anxieties in Europe, Singapore and Australia: Facts and Frictions'.

The panellists were:

- > Associate Professor Laurence Brown (ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences; Adjunct ANUCES)
- > Ms Anne McNaughton (ANU College of Law; Adjunct ANUCES)
- > Associate Professor Anju Mary Pau (Yale–NUS College)
- > Dr Ye Junjia (NTU School of Social Sciences)
- > Ambassador (Ret'd) Jørgen Ørstrøm Møller (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute; Singapore Maritime University)

In this Policy Note, Jasmine Khin, a Junior Researcher at the EU Centre in Singapore, offers a summary and analysis of the panellists' discussion of Singapore's migration and integration policies.

Panellists broadly focused on responses to international migration, which has topped the global agenda and raised a plethora of economic and political implications in both sending and receiving countries.

International migration raises contentious questions, not least humanitarian ones, and stirs emotional responses. Lawmakers and political leaders have struggled to balance rising anxieties of native populations against immigration and taking an international approach towards managing migration, which is becoming apparent as a global phenomenon. This is aggravated by the resurgence of populism and far-right ideologies across the world.

One recent example of the internationalisation of migration policy is the signing of the Global Compact for Safe and Orderly Regular Migration, which was adopted by 164 countries in Marrakech in December 2018. This was not done without acrimony and protests from nations such as the USA and Australia, both of whom refused to sign, and Brazil, who abstained. Hence, it is within this context that the PPCEUMI interdisciplinary panel focused on the politicization of immigration in a group of receiving nations including Australia, Singapore and the European Union.

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Migrant anxieties and policy priorities in Singapore

The discussion around migration in Singapore can be framed in three stages: the demographic facts, the narratives surrounding these facts, and government policy responses. In doing so, we can examine some of the Singapore Government's priorities in dealing with anxieties over migration.

As of June 2018, Singapore has a population of 5.64 million, of which 61.5 per cent are Singapore Citizens and 9 per cent are permanent residents. This group, collectively known as 'residents', makes up approximately 70 per cent of the total population in Singapore. The remaining 29 per cent are considered 'non-residents' or foreigners. When viewed from the perspective of the labour market, foreigners make up a significant number—38 per cent—of the total Singaporean workforce.

Like many other developed countries, Singapore also faces a rapidly aging population. This means a declining or stagnant birth rate that makes the population pyramid increasingly unwieldy. Singapore is reaching a tipping point where the native-born population will be unable to replenish itself to support its economy. Without a steady influx of new immigrants, the size of the working age population is going to start shrinking as well.

It is also important to look at the narratives surrounding these demographic facts. The steady, 'top-down' narrative from the government for several decades has been that Singapore needs to have a robust workforce to counterbalance an aging population. Singapore needs immigrants to ensure labour force competitiveness and maintain productivity at an acceptable level, and to keep cost of production low.

While the government wants to encourage migration to stabilise the working population, the 'ground-up' narrative from the public is focused on themes such as overcrowding and whether the infrastructure in Singapore can handle high levels of migration. Many in the public complain about the strain on infrastructure that is in turn driving up the cost of living and lowering Singaporeans' quality of life. There is also growing inequality due to high net worth individuals immigrating into Singapore and raising prices in the housing market. The last element of the public discourse entails a desire for a 'Singapore for Singaporeans'. Given the two competing narratives about migration in Singapore, how does the government frame these in their policy responses to address its own internal narrative and the narrative of their voters?

According to the Singapore Government's classification, there are six categories of foreigners: work permit holders (who work mainly in construction sites), migrant domestic workers, S pass holders (mid-skill workers and the fastest growing category of foreign workers in Singapore), employment pass workers (high-skill professionals), permanent residents, and new citizens.

Each category of foreigners has a particular set of anxieties attached to it. In response to these anxieties, the Singapore Government has introduced specific policy levers to apply to different foreign groups. For the three categories of low/mid-skill workers—which include work permit holders, migrant domestic workers, and S pass holders—there are particular sets of policy priorities.

The first is containment of low-skill migrant workers at the sectoral level to do the job that is required of them. In this policy of containment, mobility to other sectors or permanent residency is not allowed. There are also geographical boundaries imposed on low-wage foreign workers as they are allocated housing, separate from the local population.

The second policy priority is enforced temporality. That is, migrants on short-term permits have very few avenues through which to become permanent residents. Any attempt at, or what can be seen as desire for, permanence, such as pregnancy or marriage, would result in deportation.

The third policy priority can be seen in the push for automation. The government has introduced various levies, subsidies and grants to encourage companies to automate instead of hiring foreigners for low-wage jobs that Singaporeans do not want. The government also uses quotas to cut down the number of work permit holders. Moreover, due to the nature of the Singaporean workforce, which is becoming increasingly highly skilled, the number of S Pass holders has increased by 21 per cent in the last six years to 200,000 currently. This has led the Singapore Government to focus on reducing the number of S pass holders via automation.

A different approach is taken to regulating the number of high-skill workers and permanent residents. For the former, this is done by increasing the amount of minimum fixed monthly salary required to apply for an employment pass to 3,600 SGD, which is an increase of 1,000 SGD from the previous requirement. In a move called the 'Singaporeanization' of employment, if an employer wants to hire a foreigner, the employer has to prove that this is a job that a Singaporean cannot do. The government has also initiated a higher level of selectivity for Permanent Residence. While many foreigners who are eligible apply for residency, the number of rejections is very high and has risen

in recent years. The reasons for the rejections remain a 'black box' and there is no data released by the government agency on why applications fail. Hence, through various policy levers, the Singapore Government takes differentiated approaches to handling the migrant anxieties of Singaporeans.

Migrant driven diversification in Singapore

Singapore is also learning to organise migration and urbanisation as ongoing processes of migrant-driven diversification. The panellists defined diversification not as an isolated process but as being constituted by policies towards labour control and urbanisation. Singapore is quite unique in its migration geography, economic development pathways, postcolonial history, and the strong legitimacy of the state.

European and North American cities have their own discourses on multiculturalism, integration, rights and responsibilities, and post 9/11 security threats, which encapsulate the migration anxieties in these contexts. Singapore, while also struggling with these anxieties, has its own discourse on what 'belonging' means. In other words, to differentiate these discourses is to recapture in context what Stuart Hall identified as one of the key questions of the 21st century: the capacity to live with difference.

In many urban Asian contexts, coexisting and managing difference is seen as a postcolonial reality. Like many postcolonial cities, Singapore is a child of diaspora as well as a child of migration. The British laid the institutional foundations of race as mode of social organisation and managing diversity. This manifested spatially as can be seen in ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown and Kampong Glam. This has been translated into the contemporary structure of social organisation along a racial line known as the 'Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others' (CMIO) framework.

This CMIO multiracial framework makes up older waves of diversity, which besides informing the identity of Singaporeans, also manifests spatially. The government agency Housing Development Board (HDB) has pioneered its racial integration policy through housing allocation and racial quotas. More than 85 per cent of Singaporeans live in HDB flats, which means a majority of Singaporeans live in close proximity to people of other racial backgrounds. Hence, integration through racial harmony is part and parcel of everyday life in Singapore.

In the 21st Century, Singapore's integration policy is being transformed from the CMIO approach and is being driven largely by carefully calibrated labour migration. That is apparent in stringent management of migration flows which intersects with labour policies and underwrites the contours of urban diversification. It is worth noting that urbanisation in Asian contexts is rarely geared towards naturalisation. Hence, European and American understandings of integration and settlement are understood differently in this part of the world.

Migrants in Singapore are limited geographically as well as to their sectors in the labour market and have differentiated rights and privileges from citizens. Much like countries such as South Korea and Hong Kong, integration policies in Singapore situate who the desirable long-term migrants are. One way this is done is through the classification of visas and categorisation of labour migrants. This shapes the availability of pathways for urban integration, permanent residency, and labour market integration for new migrants. Thus, difference is constituted at the policy

level through the proliferation of migration and legal statuses. Present day diversification is organised along the line of different levels of skilled and unskilled labour. The majority of new arrivals to Singapore are low-wage labour migrants and a large number of them who are male labourers live in self-contained dormitories separated geographically from the rest of the population. This also speaks to the migration anxieties of the local population and shows that difference manifests in everyday life for Singaporeans and immigrants as well. Recent findings carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies reveal a level of discomfort from Singaporeans towards new migrants, while older waves of diversity, such as racial harmony amongst CMIO populations, are widely accepted. The discomfort that Singaporeans feel towards new immigrants can be seen to reach beyond ethnicity or ancestry. For example, although Chinese Singaporeans are the majority, social tensions between local Chinese and new Chinese immigrants have become more apparent. Despite their shared ancestry, Chinese Singaporeans have been vocal about different lifestyles and social practices between them and their immigrant counterparts.

One example is the ‘Currygate’ incident involving new Chinese immigrants and their neighbours, a local Indian family. It was reported that the Chinese immigrant family complained to their community mediation centre about the smell of curry cooked by their Indian neighbours. This sparked a nationwide solidarity protest in which Singaporeans came together to cook a pot of curry, a dish ubiquitously loved by the local population. This incident also sparked discussions about the need for new immigrants to integrate into local culture and adjust to the existing way of life rather than impose their cultural expectations on the locals. A conclusion can be drawn that the real test of integration of migrants in Singapore seems to be whether new migrants have adopted civil codes and how they present themselves in public. Thus, it seems difference-making in Singapore cannot be reduced to race, ethnicity or religion, but more importantly to codes of conduct in public.

In summary, Singapore, as a city-state with a strong model of governance, has taken great care to ensure that the social fabric of the nation is held together by policies that take into

account population anxieties as well as urgent demographic needs. On the one hand, Singaporeans have become accustomed to diversity and living amongst traditional modes of difference that were introduced since the colonial era. However, new forms of migration remain a source of anxiety for the local population, and this has mainly been regulated by policy intervention.



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PPCEUMI is concerned with the analysis of policy and governance reforms based on explorations of existing EU approaches and the experiences of third countries such as the USA, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. It provides a comprehensive avenue to improve the EU and its member states' implementation of best practice. Policy- and solution-oriented, PPCEUMI focuses on the immediate period of pre- and point-of-arrival of migrants, as well as the longer term process of integration. PPCEUMI welcomes interested academic members wishing to participate in network activities or publications. For further information, visit <http://bit.ly/PPCEUMI> or email europe@anu.edu.au



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