

Talk to the heart, not just the head

Singaporeans' attitudes towards foreigners, who many perceive as coming to Singapore only for economic gains, must be changed. -My Paper

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Institute director David Chan, a professor of psychology at SMU

SINGAPORE - The Government has to go beyond monetary rewards to appeal to Singaporeans, said psychologists and sociologists at a population conference yesterday.

They explained that while Singaporeans may be practical, there is a need for the Government to address their emotional issues and psychological processes as well.

This is especially pertinent with regard to their attitudes towards foreigners, who many perceive as coming to Singapore only for economic gains and to compete for jobs, they added.

The experts were speaking at the Behavioural Sciences Institute of the Singapore Management University's (SMU's) conference on population matters held at Orchard Hotel. It was attended by 240 participants from the public sector, academia and human resources industry.

Institute director David Chan, a professor of psychology at SMU, said that when policies are crafted, one must look past monetary rewards to appeal to Singaporeans, as human behaviour is not simplistic.

"Understand that money is not the only solution and understand the underlying psychological processes (of people)," said Professor Chan. "If you don't get the psychology right, it is very difficult to do the right things and do them right."

He also said citizens have two types of commitment towards Singapore: An emotional attachment and a sense of belonging; and a sense of obligation and duty.

But they feel a sense of anger towards foreigners because they believe foreigners "are committed to Singapore only in a transactional way", or a commitment based on costs and benefits, he said.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) sociologist Mathew Mathews said that only when citizens are convinced that foreigners share their emotional commitment to the country can Singaporeans change their stance towards foreigners.

He cited an IPS study on integration done in 2011, which showed that 58.1 per cent of 1,000 Singapore-born citizens thought new citizens are likely to use Singapore as a

stepping stone to other countries. Some 64 per cent also felt that new citizens are likely to return to their home countries after achieving success here.

But for foreigners to forge an emotional attachment to Singapore, a "laissez-faire approach" will not work.

Rather, foreigners need a sense of familiarity, meaningful friendships and cultural acceptance here to become attached.

"If the host community is not willing to accept the immigrants' roots, then it reduces their sense of esteem and therefore there is little emotional attachment."