This will give them confidence to interact with people of all cultures from around the world. This is important, he said, noting that other cities are a lot more crowded in terms of liveable space. He cited former chief planner Liu Thai Ker, who said in 2014 that Singapore should plan for 80 million people for it to remain sustainable in the long term. Giving an account of a conscript who was not comfortable with having foreigners working in his company, Mr Heng said there was a “difficult trade-off” of integration Singaporeans have to make.

“On the one hand, many Singaporeans understand, rationally, we should have more people join us because our workforce is declining. But at the same time, emotionally, we don’t feel comfortable that there are people who appear a little different from us and I would like to keep this to my circle. This almost tribal feeling is a very deep one,” Mr Heng added.

Asked about technological disruption and artificial intelligence, he said some routine tasks can be automated but more complex ones will require human empathy and creativity. He cited educational technology, saying that while machines can replace repetitive tasks that teachers do, education is not just about head knowledge, literacy and numeracy.

“Education is about building the person, the social and emotional development of the child. It’s about the development of character, values, and in particular, about the development of social skills – how you work with other people,” said the former education minister.

Mr Heng said being able to work together effectively is key, but combining the strengths of people is not straightforward.

“With e-commerce, the market is no longer a selling door to a door. If you have a great product that can be on a great e-commerce site, you sell around the world,” he said.

In the economic front, Singapore – but for the entire region and meritocracy...

FINANCE MINISTER HENG SWEE KEAT

We don’t want a world where people build walls around themselves. Our pledge – regardless of race, language or religion – is not to be taken lightly... but really as a way of life for Singapore.

S’poreans must remain open to foreigners, says Heng

S’pore will have ethnic minority PM at right time, says minister

At the right time, and when enough Singaporeans are open to the idea, the country will have a prime minister from an ethnic minority, and this is something the Government hopes for, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

At a dialogue at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Mr Heng said it is a positive sign that young people are comfortable with having a minority-race PM because the Singapore way of “regardless of race, language or religion” has been an emphasis in the system for so long.

But based on his interactions with people during the past two general elections in 2011 and 2015, and the by-elections in Hougang in 2012 and Punggol East in 2013, a wide spectrum of residents from different languages, races and income groups – such views are not as common as they are among the younger generation, he added.

Mr Heng was responding to a question from Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt of NTU’s Public Policy and Global Affairs programme about whether it was Singapore or the ruling People’s Action Party that was unprepared for a PM from a minority community.

Late last year, Mr Heng was selected as his peers among the fourth-generation political-office holders to be their leader, and is tipped as the next PM.

Following up on the question, Mr Heng asked the audience for a show of hands on whether they would be happy to have a non-Chinese PM.

Many raised their hands.

Mr Heng said: “I will say that it is a very positive sign that the young people will be quite comfortable, precisely because our policy of ‘regardless of race, language, religion’ has been an emphasis in our system for so long. So that if we are the young people who grow up in a very different way and therefore you are quite ready. I do think that at the right time, when enough people think that way, we would have, we may have, a minority who becomes the leader of the country.”

Citizens in conversations with different groups of people during the elections, he added: “But if you ask me, whether across the voting population, would that be the outcome, I personally don’t think so.”

Turning to the issue of the 2017 presidential election being reconsidered for a candidate from the Malay community, Mr Heng said: “It is precisely because we need to place this emphasis institutionally, that we recognise that we have not arrived and it is important for us to ensure that we have the safeguard.”

Adrian Lim