

Heng: S'poreans need open mindset, multicultural outlook

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Singaporeans need to be open and understanding of foreigners – whether immigrants or workers and students from other countries – so that they have the confidence to interact with people of all races, languages and cultures from around the world, said Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat.

It will be very negative for Singaporeans to draw an exclusive circle for themselves as Singapore would then have no place in the world, Mr Heng told about 700 students attending a ministerial dialogue at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) yesterday.

“We don’t want a world where people build walls around themselves,” he said to laughter.

“Our pledge – regardless of race, language or religion – is not to be taken lightly... but really as a way of life for Singapore.

“Beyond that, we ought to deepen our understanding of other people... whether they are new immigrants, our immediate neighbours, students from NTU, National University of Singapore or other universities,” he said.

The need for Singaporeans to have an open mindset and a multicultural outlook was one of his key messages at the two-hour forum, during which he was questioned on a raft of issues, including population growth, technological disruption and meritocracy.

On the projected population of 6.9 million by 2030, set out in the Government’s 2013 Population White Paper, Mr Heng said the number goes beyond how densely populated Singapore would be. The social space is as important.

Singapore’s population density is not excessive, he said, noting that other cities are a lot more crowded in terms of liveable space.

Giving an account of a constituent who was not comfortable with having foreigners working in his company, Mr Heng said there lies a “difficult trade-off” of integration Singaporeans have to make.

“On the one level, many Singaporeans understand, rationally, we should have more people join us because our workforce is declining,” he said.

“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.”

On the economic front, Singapore needs to be open as well. Noting that Singapore should not be too narrow in its development of deeper skills and innovation, he said: “Asia and the world is our hinterland, and how we can add value and create value – not just for Singapore – but for the entire hinterland, will define our market.”

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