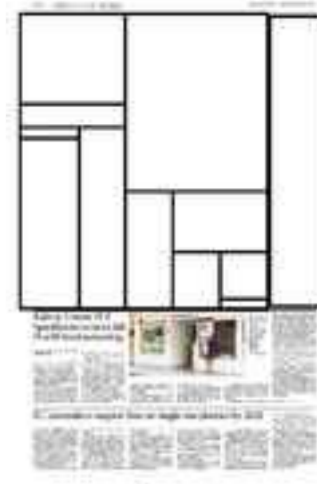


Headline	S'poreans must remain open to foreigners, says Heng
Publication	THE STRAITS TIMES
Date	2019-03-29
Section	MAIN
Page Number	A10
Article Size	1215.681 cm2
Journalist	adrianl@sph.com.sg (Adrian Lim Political Correspondent)
AVE	\$ 14175



# S'poreans must remain open to foreigners, says Heng

This will give them confidence to interact with people of all cultures from around the world

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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.

Mr Heng also encouraged students on exchange programmes to interact and learn from others.

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.

He cited former chief planner Liu Thai Ker, who said in 2014 that Singapore should plan for 10 million people for it to remain sustainable in the long term.

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.

“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.

Quoting the saying “Teochew nang kaki nang” – which translates to “Teochew people, we are the same people” – Mr Heng said it makes sense to retain some form of identity and culture in multicultural Singapore, but Singapore must not propagate the notion that only people exactly like us are our people.

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 are our hinterland, and how we can add value and create value – not just for Singapore – but for the entire hinterland, will define our market.

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

Mr Heng also encouraged the students to interact with those from other countries, as this will create more opportunities for themselves in the future.

“In your university days, it is the



Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat with NTU Students’ Union president Edward Lim, who was the moderator at a ministerial dialogue at Nanyang Technological University yesterday. It would be very negative for Singaporeans to draw an exclusive circle for themselves as Singapore would then have no place in the world, said Mr Heng. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

time when it is best for you to really meet your future partner,” he quipped, saying it was where he met his wife.

Asked about technological disruption and artificial intelligence, he said some routine tasks can and should 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, like numeracy and literacy.

“Education is about building the person, the social and emotional development of the child. It’s about the development of character, of values, and in particular, also 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.

“People will always quarrel and have disagreements. How do you make a team productive requires leadership and social skills. Increasingly, I see so many companies – as well as our own public service – as-

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FINANCE MINISTER HENG SWEE KEAT

sessing our officers not on paper qualifications and IQ, but on how well they work with people.

“I don’t believe machines will make us redundant, but I also caution that our willingness to change, to develop new skills so that machines make us even more productive, is going to be a critical task.”

To do that, companies must think hard about redesigning jobs and reskilling workers. Students must think of how they can learn any time, anywhere, and from any-

one in the years ahead, he said.

He related a story about a candidate in an interview at the Monetary Authority of Singapore – where he was the managing director – who said he wanted the job to learn as much as possible and one day take Mr Heng’s position.

“There was no notion of how to want to contribute to the organisation. If you think in that narrow, self-centred way, you will not make progress,” said Mr Heng.

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## 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 by his peers among the fourth-generation political officeholders to be their leader, and is tipped to be 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 is why our young people 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.”

Citing his interactions with different groups of people during the elections, he added: “But if you ask me, that 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 reserved 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