Introduction
1. This is a report on a closed door discussion titled *Attitudes on Emigration Among Young Singaporeans*, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). Ambassador (Amb) Ong Keng Yong, Director of IPS, opened the session by highlighting that Singaporeans and the political leaders were concerned about Singaporeans emigrating out of Singapore. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew had said that 4 to 5 % of the top 30% of the population emigrated each year, primarily to English-speaking countries. The Singapore National Population Secretariat statistics for June 2008 revealed that 153,000 Singaporeans were overseas in June 2008, compared to 147,500 a year ago. This presumably did not include those who had given up their Singapore citizenship. IPS was interested in the long term perspective on emigration and it was therefore useful to look at the attitudes of Singaporeans on this matter. This was the third of a series of discussions on emigration and the speaker Dr Leong Chan-Hoong would share findings from his research and his own views on the matter.

Participants
2. Twenty participants attended the discussion, including academics, government officials, researchers, a journalist and a Nominated Member of Parliament.

Presentation by Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Head of Psychology Programmes, School of Arts and Social Sciences, SIM University
3. The speaker for the session was Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Head of Psychology Programmes, School of Arts and Social Sciences at the Singapore Institute of Management University (UniSIM). He began by saying that research on emigration was a marginalised sub-discipline in Psychology because the focus there tended to be on the individual. He welcomed the opportunity to discuss his thoughts at the event that would allow for the cross-pollination of ideas with sociologists, demographers and statisticians.
4. Dr Leong observed that emigration had been a public policy concern of Singaporeans since the late 1990s. It seemed like an inevitable result of globalisation, which offered more opportunity for people to travel and work abroad. Some Western developed nations had set out to attract foreign talent. However, there seemed to be a paradox of prosperity and departure in Singapore, where although we were prosperous and expected to retain citizens, people were emigrating. There was no ‘hard data’ on the numbers and he had to rely on other information in the public domain and proxies to gauge attitudes. For instance, a 2006 survey of 2,548 teenagers by the Singapore Press Holdings Editorial Division revealed that 53% of teenagers polled in Singapore in comparison to 39% of teenagers in India and 28% in Malaysia expressed the desire to emigrate. The number of relocation agencies had grown to at least 15 to 20 in 2006, while there were fewer than 8 in 2002. In addition, the number of people applying for the ‘Certificate of No Criminal Conviction’, which was sometimes required by countries receiving emigrants, was reported to have doubled from 10 years ago.

5. Emigration was also a theme that Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong had raised previously as Prime Minister in the famous ‘Quitters and Stayers’ debate. However, while it was necessary to conduct greater in-depth analysis, there was little empirical data and surveys to support the research as yet. Dr Leong focused his work on migration attitudes amongst polytechnic and university undergraduate students to develop a profile of people who were likely to leave and to understand what shaped those views.

6. He surveyed 1,915 students from 16 to 26 years old, and an average of 19.8 years. 42% of the respondents were university students and 58%, polytechnic students. 40% were male, 60%, female. While the sample was not entirely representative, statistical modelling could be carried out to make the sample more typical of a representative sample because the sample size was large enough. 97% of the respondents were born in Singapore while 3% of the population was born abroad. 1.8% of the respondents had obtained overseas permanent resident status. The household income of the respondents ranged between S$3,000 and S$3,999 which was close to the median income of Singapore households. 84% of respondents lived in Housing Development Board flats.

7. The survey demonstrated the complex concepts of emigration that respondents had. Some wanted to leave Singapore for the long term, while others, for a fixed period of time, perhaps to obtain permanent residency abroad and return eventually. Dr Leong noted a sense of relative deprivation resulting from the influx of foreign talent and said that it ought to be monitored. While the respondents had a positive outlook for the country, they did not think they would benefit personally
from the country’s prosperity. Respondents also indicated an average level of subjective wellbeing and strong family ties.

8. Cluster analyses of the data were conducted to identify subgroups in the respondents according to various socio-psychological factors, personal values and the intention to emigrate. This threw up four typologies among the respondents: Disenchanted, Connected Stayers, Explorers, and Marginalised Stayers. 21% of respondents were the ‘Disenchanted’. They had strong intention to emigrate and saw it as acceptable and desirable. These Singaporeans tended to be socially disengaged from their families and the nation-state, rated lower on subjective wellbeing, were more pessimistic about Singapore’s future, felt deprived due to the presence of foreign talent and tended to have the values of openness and self-enhancement.

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10. The second category, ‘Connected Stayers’, comprised 23% of the respondents, and displayed opposite tendencies to the ‘Disenchanted’. They had strong family ties, were proud to be Singaporean, they had high levels of subjective wellbeing, were optimistic of Singapore’s future, did not consider foreign talent as a threat and possessed values of conservation and self-transcendence.

11. In between the two extremes of the Connected Stayers and the Disenchanted; were the ‘Explorers’ comprising 25% of respondents and ‘Marginalised Stayers’ comprising the largest group at 32% of the respondents. Explorers had a strong desire for ‘short-term migration’ and wished to return to Singapore. They felt competent enough to emigrate and saw it as socially positive and acceptable. They were very rooted to their families but not necessarily to the nation-state, and saw foreign talent as a marginal threat. They tended to be optimistic of Singapore’s future, and were very achievement-oriented and open to new experiences.

12. Marginalised Stayers displayed little intention to emigrate and did not feel competent enough to leave. They did not see emigration as an acceptable social trend and were somewhat disengaged from their families. They were proud to be Singaporean and were somewhat positive of Singapore’s future. They did not hold the view that foreign
talent deprived them of opportunities and had neutral levels of subjective wellbeing.

13. Using chi-square and anova analyses, Dr Leong said that there were disproportionately more males than females in the Disenchanted category, suggesting that National Service was not particularly effective in encouraging rootedness for male university undergraduates. The reverse was true for the Connected Stayers category. Disproportionately more Explorers had stayed abroad for more than three consecutive months and had relatives residing overseas. This suggested that Explorers were comfortable with being out there in the world because they had overseas exposure and connections. The reverse was true for the Marginalised Stayers category. There were also no age or educational differences (university versus polytechnic students) between the four clusters, suggesting that personal attitudes and perceptions of emigration were not influenced by the two demographic factors. Explorers were found to enjoy the highest household income/accommodation, followed by the Connected Stayers and then the Marginalised Stayers.

14. Dr Leong then talked about the motivations to emigrate through a factor analysis of personal needs and fulfillment. This explored the likelihood (i.e. unlikely fulfilled, medium, likely fulfilled) in which a person could achieve various life goals (e.g. achieve a high income, have a sense of belonging to a community) in Singapore and a comparative foreign country of their choice. In short, respondents rated twice for each life goal (e.g. high income), first for Singapore and second for the foreign country. Separate factor analyses was conducted for the two separate reference locations and six identical dimensions emerged for both analyses: 1) affiliation and social community, 2) status and wealth, 3) individual stimulation and autonomy, 4) physical comfort and stability, 5) long term security concerns and 6) stress perceptions. The motivational needs discrepancy, derived by subtracting the rated likelihood that needs could be fulfilled in Singapore in comparison to other countries, revealed that respondents thought that their personal needs were more likely to be fulfilled overseas for all but one category - affiliation and social community.

15. Dr Leong drew the following conclusions from the analysis. First, it was important to make the distinction between long and short term migration. He suggested that obtaining permanent residency abroad could be the next highly sought-after status symbol. There was a receptive and favourable attitude - those who left Singapore were not seen as quitters but as people who went and did what they wanted for

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1 Singaporean males who took the polytechnic route only did their national service after completing their polytechnic studies. Singaporean males who went to university generally underwent national service before entry to university.

2 This was modeled after Yap’s (1991) and Arnold’s (1987) approach to measure migration motivation.
themselves. Second, Dr Leong said that there was a tripartite compact between the state, native Singaporeans and foreign talent. The perception of relative deprivation and negative attitudes towards foreign talent were a reflection on the state of the social compact between native Singaporeans and the government as they felt that it was the state that regulated the infl ow and outflow of foreign talent.\(^3\) Third, status and wealth, stimulation and autonomy and physical comfort and stability were key correlates of emigration. Fourth, it was clear that family ties were integral in the social construction of rootedness. This meant more effort should be focused on strengthening families in order to boost rootedness.

16. Possible areas of future research included the attitudes on emigration and foreign talent among Singaporean professional, managers, executives and technicians. Trend studies could also be carried out to measure the social pulse of citizenship in a similar approach to that was taken by the Eurobarometer survey, which monitors the evolution of public opinion in Europe.

**Discussion**

17. On the sense of relative deprivation that Singaporeans might have vis-à-vis foreign talent, Amb Ong wondered if the problem could be addressed by better communication of the key benefits that came from welcoming foreign talent to Singapore and by improving public diplomacy. After all, he said, foreign workers tended to take jobs that Singaporeans did not want or jobs where there were not enough Singaporeans to do them anyway.

18. A participant asked if global connectedness would increase one’s rootedness to a country or increase the likelihood of migration. Dr Leong replied that the relationship between global connectedness and national rootedness was not linear or mutually exclusive\(^4\) but multi-dimensional or multinomial, as illustrated by the cluster analysis. As the country needed its people to be globally-connected, the way ahead was in increasing local rootedness.

19. Another participant asked if the survey data could be benchmarked against findings of similar studies for other countries as it was very difficult to judge if figures were high or low and should be of concern. For instance, where the figures that 15-20% of respondents who wanted permanent residency abroad and the 15% who were thinking of migrating permanently, high or low? Dr Leong agreed that whether they were high or low was really a subjective interpretation of the number and that for

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\(^3\) This comment was based on the Social Psychology concept that the dislike of one by another did not occur in a vacuum.

\(^4\) For instance, Explorers were both globally and locally connected and would eventually return if they left the country.
him, any figure greater than 30% would make it something of concern. He was only aware of cross-national comparisons that had been done between Singapore, India and Malaysia reported by the Straits Times.

20. Dr Gillian Koh, one of the convenors of the discussion, agreed that Dr Leong’s study should be replicated on a longitudinal basis and across countries (of similar profile types). Amb Ong agreed and suggested that Dr Leong could also compare his findings with that of the Gallup World Poll. Amb Ong said he felt that the number of Singaporeans who wished to leave and take up permanent residency and even citizenship elsewhere was not very alarming in the global context, in comparison to Gallup Poll figures. Dr Leong also added that his data had been collected in the midst of a strong economic climate between end-2006 and early-2007, and did not know if the findings would be different during an economic downturn.

21. Dr Yap Mui Teng, the other convenor of the discussion said that Dr Leong’s analysis had grouped Singaporeans who had long and short term intentions of leaving the country together. She suggested that the two groups could be qualitatively different and that analysing the data by these two separate categories might yield more meaningful insights.

22. Another participant cautioned that it was important to make a distinction between the intentions given in a survey and the real reasons why people would emigrate. He pointed out the dangers of conflating factors such as national pride and disenchantment to the desire to emigrate as there was the implicit suggestion that the occurrence of any one of these factors would automatically bring about migration. Would the reverse causal relationship then be true? Also he felt it was important to be conscious about being affected by the government’s dominant discourse about emigration today. Dr Leong replied that it was good to look at the emigration issue from both sides, and suggested that the triangulation of data could produce mutually-reinforcing findings. Dr Leong agreed that care should be taken in making conclusions about causality between dependent and independent variables. He had no definitive answer on whether positive or negative factors had a stronger causal relationship but took heart that at least his study was an attempt to explore how the different factors related to each other and provided the beginnings of an on-going study of the issue.

23. A participant commented that national security appeared to be at the forefront of policy discussions. He asked if individual security was taken care of, adding that he was sympathetic to Singaporeans who migrated on a permanent basis to improve their individual security. Dr Leong replied that researchers should remain detached and objective in researching such provocative issues and it was not the call of a
researcher, but the government to make such judgments on the course of action that should be taken.

24. A participant said that perhaps the views of the young might change over the course of their lives. He suggested that further research could be carried out to interpret the factors that may shape a young person’s views on emigration over time to derive a life-cycle profile. Another participant asked Dr Leong to comment on his statement that the family unit played an important role in rooting the individual to the country. Dr Leong said that there was no simple relationship between the strength of family ties and the likelihood of migration. However, family ties were definitely stronger in some of the categories (Connected Stayers, Explorers) than others (Disenchanted, Marginalised Stayers).” Another participant added that youths were generally affected by group-think, and that attitudes would change as they were exposed in later life to different networks. The participant further suggested the analysis of social networks, which could reveal further implications on the type of family ties that could be built.

25. A participant suggested that the sense of rootedness and belonging among Singaporeans would increase if there could be a more collegial relationship between the nation-state and the human being so that citizens were not spoken of as digits of production. A participant added that Singapore had put economic concerns at the forefront and understood globalisation in terms of economic development. With reference to the paradox of prosperity, he suggested that looking at things from the perspective of people who would want a good life (in addition to prosperity), and comparing that with how they thought the government would help them attain the good life, could help explain the rates of permanent migration into Singapore.

26. Other participants suggested that future research could look into the impact of family culture on emigration and factors that led to the leaving or staying of Singaporeans who married foreign spouses.

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Notes taken by Debbie Soon, IPS Research Assistant