Diversity 101: Let’s talk about social issues

Identity and inclusion among topics students are exploring in schools, tertiary institutions

Yaun Sin

Nominated MP Chia Yee Yong made a heartfelt plea during a recent debate on the proposed constitutional amendments to the electoral presidency. She called on Singaporeans to talk about race and religion instead of politicising the issue. Following the decision to reserve next year’s polls for Malay candidates.

Minister of State Janil Puthurary made a similar call in August after an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey showed that half of Singaporeans hold negative stereotypes of others races.

In jail, who is chairman of OnePeople, a national body that promotes racial and religious harmony, said people are hesitant and afraid to discuss race relations because they fear being seen as racist.

In fact, the conversation has already started with schools and tertiary institutions introducing several initiatives to tackle issues of diversity, identity and inclusion.

For instance, Yale-NUS College started an inter-group dialogue programme last year and Singapore Management University (SMU) initiated a study this year to explore perceptions on same issues.

"There is definitely a lot more talk (about diversity). We hear it in the classrooms, and students ask us where are the spaces on campus where they can feel safe to discuss such issues," said Mr Ho Jack Yong, assistant director of diversity and inclusion at SMU.

WHAT PROMPTED THE CONVERSATION?

Mr Ho said students have become more interested since global conversations about the dangers of Islamophobia, and locally, the debate over the electoral presidency and all the differences in rewards for able-bodied and disabled athletes.

SMU’s study aims to gather data on perceptions by students, staff and faculty on issues that include gender and disability. More than 500 people have been interviewed, and their responses are being analysed, said Mr Ho.

SMU said the study will be done regularly for the diversity and inclusion office to track the outcomes of their efforts, and allow them to identify where there may be stronger need for interventions towards specific groups of people.

Is racism a problem in Singapore?

Is Singapore a racist country?

That was the title of a blog post penned by Yale-NUS undergraduates Jiwon Sue and Maw Lin in April which gained much attention on social media and online forums.

In the post, the 21-year-old South African detailed her experiences of being subjected to racist remarks or behaviour after arriving in Singapore in 2014 as a foreign student.

This included people who "squatted" in her dorm, stole her money, and bullied her "to make her feel inferior".

Ms Hsu, a Yale-NUS undergraduate from South Africa, has written a blog post about her experiences of racism here. PHOTO: FACEBOOK, FACEBOOK

Is racism a problem in Singapore? It is still a problem.

"For you to be terrified of a stranger, there has to have been the conditioning that dark is bad," said Ms Hsu.

She said people were surprised when she told them the post. After all, they said, she had grown up in South Africa, where the social policy of apartheid, a system in which black South Africans received fewer social and political rights than white South Africans, only ended in 1994.

Ms Hsu noted: "In South Africa, there was totalitarian and authoritarian rule, and it was a very black society. In Singapore, there is also a strong culture of non-violence. It is a very peaceful society and multicultural, and I think that is reflected in the people's attitude towards me."

Ms Hsu and the topic of racism should be seen as a starting point for discussions about why racism ideas are formed, and how we understand other cultures better.

"People need to be aware: that it doesn't make you a bad person to have these (unintended) thoughts," said Ms Hsu, who welcomed Yale-NUS students to express honest conversations on campus.

The arts and humanities major, who says she "adores" Singapore for its cultural accessibility, hopes that such interpersonal discussions might extend beyond the school community.

"With such a diverse group of students in Yale-NUS, if we keep our interpersonal discussions to ourselves, we may quickly run out of insights to give and facts to exchange because we're all part of a like-minded community anyway," she said.

Is racism a problem in Singapore? It is still a problem.