A delicate balancing act

S’pore needs to ‘join the dots’ for new citizens

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SINGAPORE — You cannot have open minds unless you communicate with each other and for that to happen, both newcomers and Singapore citizens need to have at least some functional grasp of English, a common working language.

So, the National Integration Council (NIC) has launched a website listing the schedules and types of English courses to help new immigrants improve their proficiency in English.

But learning to communicate in English is not enough. Singapore needs to “join the dots” of those who have made a “conscious rational decision” of becoming a citizen, and link it, so that in “his heart, he feels a bond of commonality with other citizens and also find a way to attach his heart to this place called Singapore”, said Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports.

Dr Balakrishnan, who is also the NIC chairman, was speaking at a closed-door dialogue on integration yesterday at the National Library.

Come March, the Government will be rolling out a pilot programme, the Singapore Citizenship Journey in Tanjong Pagar, Sembawang and West Coast Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs).

The programme is an enhancement of the current orientation programme for new citizens.

It will incorporate interactive online elements, site visits to places of historical significance, and grassroots sharing sessions.

Dr Balakrishnan said Singaporeans have “valid concerns” about immigration as it concerns issues such as academic competition, housing prices and jobs. But he noted: “You can’t integrate newcomers if you have an insecure local population.”

That said, he assured that “Singapore citizens will always come first” and that the Government has “sharpened” the distinctions between citizens and permanent residents. Examples can be seen in the balloting of Primary 1 places, school and public health facilities fees. However, the Government cannot sharpen the distinction so far that it “becomes a deterrent to new citizens or potential citizens”, he said.

“The key point is that we cannot shield Singaporeans from competition but we can give them a head-start so that they’re not afraid of competition, because it’s only after we’ve overcome the emotional barrier, can we then see that … remaining an open global city is vital in our self-interest,” he said. He also called on “old citizens” to do their part as integration is a two-way process.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said the Government is trying to maintain a “delicate balancing act” in managing expectations of both constituencies. He said: “It looks like they are moving from the cognitive to arguments that appeal to the heart. They realise that immigration could be a hot political issue.”

Assistant Professor Tan explained that we cannot be seen as xenophobic, otherwise potential immigrants may be put off from coming to Singapore and this will affect our national population policy. The Government may also have problems implementing certain policies which would benefit old citizens but not the new ones, he added.