Govt has helped prepare them for race of life and to face competition

By Melissa Sim

POLYTECHNIC student Matthew Zachary Liu told the Prime Minister that some young people feel left behind because they cannot keep up with the foreign talent allowed in by the Government.

As a result, they yearn for a government that is not just competent, but fair and empathetic, he said.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong assured him that young Singaporeans are not being left behind.

"We have equipped you, you have got good running shoes, you have got good gear, you have got good training, and I think that we are equipping you to run a good race," Mr Lee said.

"Whether you are in the poly, the university or have gone through the ITE (Institute of Technical Education), I think in Singapore, we make sure that you have the best chance possible because the competition isn’t the foreigner who might be here, it is the millions of foreigners who are in the other places, and they are competing with us, whether we like it or not," Singapore Management University Assistant Professor Eugene Tan said while Singaporeans understood the rational arguments on the need for foreign talent, they could not help feeling marginalised as the term foreign talent implied that locals were somehow less talented.

Mr Lee agreed it was harder to change people’s emotions towards foreigners.

"It takes time, it takes personal contact and effort, and it is not something which can be forced by the Government, so we have to take cognizance of that and calibrate our policies in order to be able to work," he said.

Mr Lee also addressed a question on how the influx of foreigners would affect Singapore’s nation-building process.

He said there would be an impact if the influx is too fast as "you need time to integrate them, to get them to be acclimatised, to get them to be more Singaporean and their children to be Singaporean".

Viewers also asked Mr Lee about foreigners taking away jobs from less-educated Singaporeans.

Mr Lee said there are measures in place to help locals, including the foreign worker levy and the Workfare Income Supplement, which tops up the wages of older, less-skilled citizens.

But in the long term, he said the way to help Singaporeans is not through protection, but through upgrading their skills.

Observing that he and the 12 participants had discussed a range of issues during the hour-long forum, Mr Lee said in his closing remarks that they all boiled down to "our future".

He reminded Singaporeans that they lived in an uncertain world, which presents both risks and opportunities.

"You need good leadership, you need a capable government, you need a government which has a feel for the people and feels for the people’s concerns and will look after them, and if the people make the effort and the Government does its best, I think we have a bright future here," he said.