‘S’pore has to be open to globalisation’

Vivian responds to students’ concerns on foreign talent at dialogue

FOR some time, Mr Kent Goh, 24, has had doubts about Singapore’s foreign talent policy and how it was going to benefit ordinary Singaporeans.

Yesterday, he managed to clear up some of his misgivings after attending a dialogue at the National University of Singapore (NUS) with Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan.

Mr Goh, a second-year NUS chemical engineering student, said: “I had misconceptions about foreign talent. I wondered why we allowed so many foreigners into Singapore, who are here just to earn money.”

“I now understand a bit more why Singapore has to open up to compete globally. Yes, globalisation presents opportunities for Singapore, but there are threats that the Government needs to be aware of and take appropriate measures to balance the pros and the cons.”

Like him, concerns about the impact of globalisation and influx of foreign talent also weighed heavily on the minds of an audience of 400 during the annual Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum as they peppered Dr Balakrishnan with questions.

Now in its 10th year, the topic at yesterday’s forum was Globalisation: Threat Or Opportunity For The Ordinary Singaporean?

It was also the first time that the NUS Students’ Political Association opened the forum to the public.

The questions from participants included: What is the Government doing to promote and retain the Singaporean identity amidst the influx of foreigners here and an outflow of Singaporeans overseas? Why aren’t there measures to ensure that foreign workers coming here must first possess a decent level of spoken English?

In its bid to attract more talent, is Singapore also crowding out potential talent who might be turned off by the idea of living in an increasingly crowded city?

In a serious but at times lighthearted tone, Dr Balakrishnan tried to allay some concerns in his replies to the questions and in his 20-minute opening speech, where he also outlined why Singapore has to open up and attract foreign talent.

“Our doors are always open to the world. We want to attract the best brains here so that they can go back to their countries and bring their knowledge back. But there are also risks. We have to ensure that we have a strong local identity,” he said.

Dr Balakrishnan also referred to Singapore’s lack of natural resources as a factor. But he also said Singapore had several key advantages that ensured its ability to compete internationally.

Besides a “high trust” environment, an honest, competent government and a fair, tolerant society, another key ingredient has been Singapore’s disciplined and hardworking workforce.

“So we are in the game, though we have no choice but to compete. But we do have these key advantages on our side,” he said.

Dr Balakrishnan said, however, that he also recognised threats that globalisation can pose to ordinary Singaporeans.

Chief among his fears is that Singapore may become irrelevant to the world one day. That could happen if young Singaporeans start making the wrong choices or take the easier path, he said.

Second-year Arts student Trong Vu, who is from Vietnam, said whether Singapore will remain as it is 20 years down the road given that foreigners are making up a growing proportion of the population and the birth rate among Singaporeans is falling.

Dr Balakrishnan said it was important to get the right mix of Singaporean-born citizens and foreigners who want to become citizens.

But he reiterated that it is better for Singapore to attract the best brains here than for them to compete against Singapore from somewhere else.