**Door to stay open for 3 groups of foreign workers**

In demand: Those in health care and low-skilled jobs, and global talent

By RACHEL CHANG

The intake of foreign workers is projected to slow substantially from now on, but the Government made it clear in its Population White Paper yesterday that it will keep the door open for three groups of migrant workers.

The first are foreigners to support Singapore’s social needs - such as health-care and eldercare workers, who will be in great demand when one in five Singaporeans is older than 65 in 2030.

The second are foreigners to do the routine, low-skilled jobs in sectors such as construction, retail and food services. If wages are raised enough to attract locals to such jobs, costs will rise sharply. Even then, Singaporeans may still aspire for higher-skilled and more rewarding work, noted the White Paper.

The third group of foreigners whom Singapore will continue to welcome are global talent with cutting-edge skills and abilities. These foreigners will help “kick-start” new industries in Singapore, said the White Paper, and through the transfer of skills train local workers in these sectors. Plus, it added, a foreign contingent in the workforce acts as a buffer against local retrenchment in a recession.

In response to Singaporeans’ concerns about unfair job competition from foreigners, the White Paper said that incidents of discrimination should be raised with the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices.

From now until 2020, the workforce is projected to grow at a pace of 1 per cent to 2 per cent a year. Of this, 0.7 percentage point will be from the local contribution, while the rest will be from the injection of foreign manpower. From 2020 to 2030, the workforce is projected to grow at 1 per cent a year, of which the local contribution will shrink to 0.1 percentage point. These projected growth rates are well below the average of 3.3 per cent a year of the last 30 years. It is substantially lower than the pace of recent years. From 2007 to last year, the workforce swelled at a rate of about 7 per cent a year.

The Government has explained that this rapid expansion is a result of the decision to grab growth opportunities when they arose. But when asked yesterday if it will breach its new projections for workforce expansion if such opportunities come up in the future, Acting Minister for Manpower Tan Chuan-Jin said: “We need to forgo some of that because there’s a cost that comes with growth. If we allow unbridled growth, if we meet all the demands that are made on us, you will also find that the numbers become quite untenable.”

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Associate Professor Hui Weng Tat told The Straits Times that businesses should expect tighter controls on foreign workers if the 1 to 2 per cent growth projection is to be realised in the next seven years.

IMD Global Education senior lecturer Tan Khay Boon said companies will scale down, close or relocate in this period. “But we have proven in the past that we can adapt to changes when the need arises. In the long term, it is possible that the productivity growth will be more significant as firms will view it as the only way to survive and grow.”

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Singaporean Michelle Lim, 37, a real estate agent, tied the knot two years ago with her German husband Patrick Shulze, 41, a marketing director, who is now a Singapore PR. The White Paper has identified non-Singaporeans who marry Singaporeans as a growing contributor of new citizens.