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## **The first day of the international conference on multiculturalism in the workplace at Singapore Management University (SMU) comes to a close. What were the main talking points?**

With a diverse population, as well as a significant number of foreign workers in the manpower pool, Singapore is very much a multicultural society. With the current climate of fear and tension around the world however, what are some of the things that a society like ours must take into consideration?

To discuss issues that arise from having such a diverse population in the workplace, Singapore Management University (SMU) has created an international conference to discuss multiculturalism in the workplace.

The first day of the conference saw seven professors from academic institutions in Australia, Japan, and the USA presenting their papers on specific topics relating to the wider question of multiculturalism in the workplace. The subject matters varied but several key points remained consistent across the presentations.

### **The nature of transience**

At the opening of her presentation on working holidaymakers in Australia, Professor Catherine Gomes of RMIT University in Australia says, "232 million people globally travel for work." The nature of such travel, she explains, can be either permanent or temporary.

"These include those who travel for humanitarian purposes, such as refugees," she continues, pointing to the continuing mass refugee movement in Europe. She expressed her dislike of the term 'crisis' when discussing refugees, as she argues that there is always a net benefit to be gained from immigration. She explains, using the example of student workers in Australia, that there are benefits both from a consumer standpoint (purchasing goods within the nation) and a producer (working in usually low-skilled industries).

Likewise, Professor Tara Grey Coste from the University of Southern Maine in the USA, in her presentation on modern day Diasporas in the USA, points to the multitude of reasons individuals or families migrate.

"Some do so for education purposes," she says, pointing to the long tradition of Asian foreign students in her home country. Prof Coste also points to war refugees, "when America was considered safe," she jokes.

In all cases, entrance into the local workforce occurs, both in low-skilled and white-collar positions.

### **Exploitation**

The darker side of the hiring of foreign workers which many presenters touched on is the issue of exploitation.

"Foreign workers do not enjoy the same rights as locals," explains Prof. Gomes in her presentation, although this is a reality within the Singaporean context. This opens workers up to exploitation, especially those in low skilled positions.

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Speaking after her presentation, Prof. Gomes points to one of many cases of foreign domestic worker abuse in Singapore, with long working hours and six-day working weeks as an example of such exploitation.

More surprising however is the point by Dr. Selvaraj Velaytham of Macquarie University in Australia. "There are several examples of co-ethnic exploitation," he says, pointing to Indian Singaporeans hiring and exploiting transient Indian workers in their businesses.

### **Segregation and separation**

One of the greater difficulties faced by migrant and transient workers are fitting in. Professor Jacqueline Andall of the University of Tokyo uses a very specific example of Ghanaian men in the Japanese workforce, often those with Japanese wives. "The articulation of grievances in a way that is acceptable to Japanese management... can also be constraining," she explains, showing a gulf between two very different work place cultures.

Dr. Velayutham uses a more local example, with a Chinese chef on a work pass working in an Indian restaurant in Little India. "The workplace entails a level of misrecognition," explaining that tensions between different ethnic groups can be raised when there is a lack of understanding between the two.

This is the most common link between the presentations of the first day, and was even raised during the opening remarks of the conference. There is a gap, a 'microcosm,' as Dr. Velayutham describes it that must be explored and understood.

"We need to bracket the romantic elements of cosmopolitanism," Dr. Velayutham says, "as it is a set of everyday practices that involves labour."