

New centre to help tackle population woes

By RACHEL AU-YONG

SINGAPORE'S citizen population by 2060 will shrink to that of the early 1990s if the country's low birth rates persist and it shuts its doors to immigration, Ms Grace Fu, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, said yesterday.

It will then have about 2.6 million citizens but what's worse is that a large number will be older.

The consequences are dire as there will be fewer than 1.5 working-age citizens for every senior citizen compared to 10:1 in 1990, she pointed out.

"Things will look very much better if we raise our birth rates, remain open to immigration at a calibrated pace, and enable seniors to make continued contributions to society," she said.

Ms Fu, who is in charge of population issues, was speaking at the opening of the Centre for Family and Population Research, launched by the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Like many developed nations, Singapore is dogged by the looming problem of a greying population as a result of low birth rates.

The scenario she painted was one of several possible projections in the controversial 2013 Population White Paper, which set out plans for infrastructure to cope with a potential population ranging from 6.5 million to 6.9 million by 2030.

Yesterday, in noting the White Paper, NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan said the new centre is "well positioned to contribute" to the understanding of the population challenges facing Singapore.

Ms Fu said the issues it will study include healthcare needs in an ageing Asia and shifting so-

cial needs, like flexible work arrangements and fathers participating more in childcare and housework. She also hoped that the centre will be a hub for exchanges among researchers across Asia.

"Norms are changing and an Asia-oriented study into the changes will give useful inputs on policy solutions," she said.

Its findings could shape Singapore's policies to encourage more births and prepare for an ageing population, she said.

Ms Fu also praised the centre's 27 researchers and five international advisers for their wide range of disciplines. "As demographic issues are complex and multi-faceted, no single discipline can provide all the solutions."

The centre is helmed by Professor Jean Yeung, of NUS' Sociology Department. She said that it will focus on research in areas such as managing family stress, fertility, ageing and health.

Yesterday's opening also launched a conference on Singapore Families and Population Dynamics, at which the issues tackled include the impact of mobile technology on communication between parents and their children, and how government policy shapes the circumstances and choices of single-parent and low-income families.

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Additional reporting by Priscilla Goy and Janice Tai

“ WIDE-RANGING APPROACH

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– Ms Grace Fu, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, praising the Centre for Family and Population Research's researchers and international advisers for their wide range of disciplines

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