



**CURTIN UNIVERSITY
ETHICS EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

CULTURAL AWARENESS

SINGAPORE



CURTIN CULTURAL AWARENESS

The cultural awareness notes in this pamphlet are meant to inform staff and students about some of the customs, traditions and etiquette in a country where Curtin University operates. Cultural awareness is about being mindful that similarities and differences exist between people; that people from different cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds may have different worldviews and sometimes dissimilar perspectives on life matters. It is also about being conscious to not assign positive or negative (better or worse) values to what may be different to one's own culture.

The notes in this pamphlet also include general information about some of the laws and regulations that govern particular behaviours in the host country. Some social norms in a host country may be significantly different from the Australian context and we need to be aware that breaking rules around these may be punishable offences. We also need to be aware that some behaviours that are considered anti-social and distasteful, but not criminal in Australia, could violate laws in other countries and be subject to severe penalties.

Curtin University acknowledges the sovereignty of nations and respects the rules and laws in the countries where we operate or have alliances. While we are confident that staff and students will live Curtin values and practise Curtin's signature behaviours, as representatives of the University, we also expect that staff and students will respect the customs and traditions of these countries and not violate their laws and regulations if residing in or visiting the countries.

It should be noted that the profile in these notes is of the dominant culture and not demonstrative of sub-cultures or individual characteristics. As features of societies change and evolve, some cultural normatives are maintained while others alter significantly. These notes should therefore be taken as a general awareness. Also, as this pamphlet provides a general overview of the customs, traditions and legislation, it is advisable to keep informed about any recent changes especially with regard to legislative reforms in the host country.

CURTIN SINGAPORE

Delivering programs in Singapore since 1986, Curtin University established its campus in Singapore in 2008. The campus is located in the heart of Singapore city and offers students a range of pathway, undergraduate, postgraduate, study abroad and English language courses. Curtin Singapore is the trading name for Curtin Education Centre Pte Ltd which is managed in partnership with Navitas Ltd - a global educational group. Students at Curtin Singapore can tailor their studies to their needs, with opportunities to transfer between Curtin campuses. The courses offered at Singapore are identical to those offered in Perth in all aspects. The Curtin Singapore campus is located near to the central business district with easy access to the rest of the city.

Curtin Singapore campus



SINGAPORE

INTRODUCTION

Singapore is a city-state situated at the tip of the Malay Peninsula between Malaysia and Indonesia. With one main island and 62 other islets, it is the smallest sovereign state in South East Asia. The main island is separated from Peninsular Malaysia to the north by the Johor Strait and Indonesia in the south by the Singapore Strait. Officially called the Republic of Singapore, it occupies approximately 710 square kilometres and is inhabited by people from four major communities - Chinese (majority), Malay, Indian and Eurasian.

Despite its relatively small size, Singapore is a prosperous global commerce, finance and transport hub and plays a significant economic role within the South East Asian region. With very strong manufacturing and service sectors, its economy is heavily reliant on international trade. Major industries include electronics, chemicals, shipping and construction. In recent times, strong and dynamic economic policies have advanced it as a high-income industrialized nation that enjoys competitive advantage in high performing sectors.

With a mainly urban population, the city of Singapore is located to the south of Singapore Island, and has been built up around the banks of the Singapore River. Most of the main island has an extremely high population density. Land reclamation developments have supplemented the city-state's available territories for commercial, residential and industrial expansion. The country has a tropical climate with high humidity, abundant rainfall and consistent, high temperatures all year round. Daily temperature range between a maximum of 31-33°C during the day to a minimum not falling below 23-25°C during the night.

Historically, Singapore was one of the many trading outposts serving as an operations station for Malay, Thai, Javanese, Chinese, Indian, and Arab traders. Early records referred to the settlement as Temasek which later came to be known as Singapura (the lion city) named after a lion-like animal sighted there. It was controlled by a succession of regional empires and Malay sultanates until the early 1800s when Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, an agent of the British East India Company, established a trading post with consent from the local Malay authorities. The establishment of the post was a bid to reduce Dutch influence in the region. Sir Raffles called the port Singapore, after its ancient name. Dutch opposition to the British presence in the area was resolved through the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824. The treaty officially defined two territories: Malaya ruled by the British, and the Dutch East Indies ruled by the Dutch. Malaysia and Singapore are the current day descendent states of Malaya and Indonesia derives from the former Dutch East Indies.

During the Second World War, Singapore was occupied by the Japanese and reverted back to the British at the end of the war. Increased nationalism after the Second World War saw a number of political parties forming in the 1950s aiming to achieve self-governance. Self-governance was realized in 1959, when the People's Action Party (PAP) was elected to power, however, the colonial government still controlled internal and external relations. The leader of PAP, Lee Kuan Yew, became Singapore's first Prime Minister. A brief merger with Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia in 1963 was dissolved two years later and

Singapore became an independent republic on August 9, 1965. Singapore accomplished significant economic success under the leadership of Prime Minister Yew, a trend that continued throughout his term in office. In 1990, Lee Kwan Yew resigned to be replaced by Goh Chok Tong, who held this position until mid 2004. Lee Hsien Loong, the elder son of Lee Kuan Yew, is the current Prime Minister.

Socio-demographics	
Population	Singapore has a population of approximately 5.89 million (est. 2017).
Ethnic groups	Chinese 74.3%, Malay 13.4%, Indian 9.1% (includes Sri Lankan), other 3.2% (est. 2016).
Language	Mandarin (official) 36.3%, English (official) 29.8%, Malay (official) 11.9%, Hokkien 8.1%, Cantonese 4.1%, Tamil (official) 3.2%, Teochew 3.2%, other Indian languages 1.2%, other Chinese dialects 1.1%, other 1.1% (est. 2010).
Religion	Buddhist 33.9%, Muslim 14.3%, Taoist 11.3%, Catholic 7.1%, Hindu 5.2%, other Christian 11%, other 0.7%, none 16.4% (est. 2010).
Time	Same as Australian WST.
Currency	Singaporean Dollar AU\$1 = 1.06 Singaporean Dollar (est. October 2017).
Capital city	As a city-state, Singapore is both the country and its capital.

THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL SYSTEMS

Singapore is a republic with a parliamentary system of government based on the British legal foundation. The head of state is the president who is elected and holds office for a term of six years. As a result of constitutional amendments passed in 1991, the president of Singapore is elected to office rather than be appointed by the parliament. The president has custodial powers, particularly over government expenditure and key appointments to public office. The current president is Halimah Yacob (Singapore's first female president), who was elected unopposed in the 2017 presidential election. She is also the first female president of Singapore and the first Malay head of state in 47 years since the death of Yusof bin Ishak who was Singapore's first president. Under the Singaporean Constitution, executive powers are held by both the president and the prime minister.

The prime minister of Singapore is appointed by the president, but traditionally is the leader of the majority party. The office of the prime minister of Singapore dates back to 1959 when the country achieved self-governance from British rule. Lee Kuan Yew was the first prime minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990, succeeded by Goh Chok Tong who served until 2004 and the current prime minister is Lee Hsien Loong.

The Singapore Constitution lays down the basic governing framework which has three branches; the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. The Executive is led by the

president, the Cabinet and the attorney-general. The Cabinet comprising the prime minister and ministers appointed from among the members of parliament is responsible for the general direction and control of the government. The attorney-general is the principal legal advisor to the government and has the power and discretion to prosecute offenders. The Legislature is responsible for enacting the laws of the land. The Judiciary's function is to independently administer justice through various tiers of courts that apply the law. The chief justice, judges of appeal, judges and judicial commissioners are appointed by the president on the advice of the prime minister.

Singapore's legal system provides for Muslims to be governed by Islamic personal and family law. The Constitution allows Muslims to appeal to Islamic law in personal matters and in some cases the Islamic law applies to them routinely. Under the administration of the Muslim Law Act, a *shariah* (Islamic law) court has jurisdiction over the marital affairs of Muslims, including maintenance payments, the disposition of property upon divorce, and custody of minor children. Orders of the *shariah* court are enforced by the ordinary civil courts.

According to Singapore's Enlistment Act 1970, there is a statutory requirement for all male Singaporean citizens and second-generation permanent residents to undertake a period of compulsory national service upon reaching the age of 16 and a half years. Depending on physical and medical fitness, national servicemen serve a two-year period with the armed, police or the defence forces. On completion, servicemen are considered to be 'operationally ready' and form the reserve force that can ensure the security of the nation.

Although there are 24 official political parties in Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP) has been the leading influence in politics and has won every election since 1959. The party has maintained an overwhelming majority, and currently holds 82 of the available 84 seats in the Singaporean Parliament.

SOCIETY, CULTURE AND ETIQUETTE

Singapore's culture is made up of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian ethnic influences, making for a unique blend of traditions and local customs. Its cultural mix is also reflected in the many languages spoken including English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. Cultural and kinship ties with India, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia give Singaporeans identity characteristics that extend beyond the country's national borders.

Besides the symbolic national language *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay), there are four official languages - Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil. English is the administrative language and the medium of instruction in schools. As Singapore has a bilingual education policy, almost all Singaporeans speak at least two languages. Learning a second language is compulsory in primary schools. Pupils study English as their first language and choose one of the 'mother tongues'- Malay, Tamil, and Chinese as the second one. There are various subdialects of the different languages and a common local vernacular 'Singlish' is English infused with local colloquial terms.

There is no one official religion in Singapore and freedom of religion is guaranteed as the Government strongly supports religious harmony. However, there are restrictions in some

instances. All religious groups with more than ten members must be registered legally under the Societies Act and can be scrutinized by the government. The Singaporean Government deregistered the Christian denomination of Jehovah's Witness in 1972 on the grounds that members refuse to perform military service (obligatory for all male citizens), salute the Singaporean flag, or give allegiance to the state. Deemed to be a cult and disruptive to public welfare, the Unification Church has also been deregistered in Singapore since 1982.

The Government does not allow discourse that can affect racial or religious harmony negatively. Laws enacted to maintain religious harmony including those forbidding religious leaders from promoting ill-will among different faith groups or furthering political causes will be tightened next year (2018). The Government also plays a role in ensuring that citizens have access to religious organisations within government-built housing developments. About 82% of Singaporeans live in public housing provided by the Singaporean Housing and Development Board which is a state board responsible for public housing.

Religious multiplicity is replicated in the diversity of the ethnic groups settled in Singapore over time. The Chinese are mostly followers of Buddhism and Taoism; the Malays are largely Muslim and the Indians, mostly Hindu with significant numbers of Muslims, Sikhs and Christians from different Indian backgrounds. There is a small Jewish community in Singapore since the early 19th century and the two synagogues in service are listed as national monuments. According to the Constitution, Malays (who are mostly Muslims) are considered to be 'the indigenous people of Singapore' and the Government specifically promotes their political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural, and language interests. The Government also maintains a relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ulama Islam Singapura). The Council advises the Government on concerns of the Muslim community, drafts the weekly Friday sermon, regulates Muslim religious matters, and oversees a Muslim voluntary payroll deduction fund for mosque-building purposes.

Singapore's cuisine and eating etiquette also reflects its ethnic and religious diversity. As most Malay Singaporeans are Muslim, alcohol and pork do not feature in their meals. Rice is generally the main dish, along with a range of meat and vegetable dishes. At mealtimes, using the left hand is inappropriate, both for serving and for eating. The left hand is used for washroom purposes and therefore avoided at the dining table. It is prudent to avoid eating or passing food with the left hand too. In terms of precedence, elders are served first and it is polite to wait for them to be served before reaching for food at a table. Like in other Muslim societies, the holy month of Ramadhan is observed by Singaporean Muslims by abstaining from food and water from dawn to dusk.

Chinese Singaporean food culture places emphasis on sharing and meals are dished out in courses at the centre of the table. Food is served in bowls rather than plates, and placed in the centre of the table. While spoons are provided for soups and broths, the food is eaten with chopsticks and not by hand. It is impolite to leave chopsticks sticking upright out of dishes as this symbolises a prayer for the deceased. If eating with chopsticks is inconvenient, a person can ask for western style cutlery for eating purposes. Senior members of a group

are expected to start eating before the rest. Pork is an integral part of the Chinese diet, especially during celebrations.

Indian Singaporean cuisine consists of adaptations of Indian dishes mostly from the southern parts of India where many Indians originate from. Hindu Indians generally don't eat beef, and many are vegetarian, with some avoiding eggs and garlic too. Therefore Hindu Indians may serve only vegetarian food or may not include beef in their dishes as the cow is a sacred animal in the Hindu religion. Indians traditionally do not use cutlery for eating, and also eat with the right hand. A flat-bread (*roti*) is served with which to scoop a traditional curry. Depending on the type, food can be served individually, or with all the dishes at once.

DRESS AND DRESS-CODES

As it has a hot humid climate, dressing in Singapore is mostly casual and western clothing is common. In business environments, depending on the occupation, more formal attire is seen with men wearing shirts, ties and trousers. Jackets are usually not worn due to the hot average temperatures. Formal work wear for women includes blouses, skirts and trousers.

Traditional outfits are often worn especially on cultural occasions. Malay women wear the traditional outfit, the *baju kurung* (loosely translated as the 'enclosed dress') is a long-sleeved blouse up to the knees worn over a long skirt that reaches the ankles. The outfit is often completed by a headscarf. Chinese women often wear the *cheongsam*, a one-piece dress with a high collar and Indians may wear the *saree* or the *shalwar-kameez* depending on the regions of India they originate from. The *saree* is a female garment from the Indian sub-continent. Ranging from four to eight meters, it is a long wrap worn around the waist with one end draped over the shoulder. The *saree* is worn with a short blouse and over a slip leaving the midriff exposed. The *shalwar kameez* is also attire that originates from the Indian sub-continent. The *shalwar kameez* can be worn by both men and women, but with variations according to gender. The *kameez*, a long shirt and the *shalwar*, baggy trousers are combined to form the *shalwar kameez*.

PUBLIC SOCIAL AND BUSINESS CONTEXTS

Singapore has a set of five national values that were formalized by the Government in 1991. The shared values were proposed to forge a national identity in the light of the ethnic and religious diversity and multicultural heritage of the Singaporean society. It is premised that the home environment is the means through which the shared values are transmitted and parents are ascribed the responsibility of nurturing good citizens. The values are also inculcated through education in schools. The five values are:

- Nation before community and society above self,
- Family as the basic unit of society,
- Community support and respect for the individual,
- Consensus not conflict, and
- Racial and religious harmony.

Formal business although conducted in English has implicit etiquette rules in Singapore. Although this can vary between the different ethnic groups, as the Chinese, are the larger population, many cultural aspects are influenced by Chinese traditions.

Shaking hands with those present during a business meeting or a social occasion is expected and some Singaporeans may bow slightly when shaking hands. As hierarchy in age and status are important, it is polite to show respect to elders and those in senior management by gestures such as offering assistance or addressing them properly. Business decisions are usually reached through consensus as the overall group's interests are viewed as more significant than the individual's.

Punctuality, both at social and business occasions is expected and lateness is seen as a sign of disrespect. Although bureaucratic, many large corporations in Singapore, funded by the government are effectively managed and are highly efficient. Unlike other South East Asian cultures, Singaporeans are fast-paced, tend to get right down to business in meetings and make decisions without delay. It is appropriate to be direct, talk straight and get to the point with Singaporeans. To build up relationships, dinner or lunch in a restaurant is a common form of business socialisation. In traditional settings food may be served all at once without drinks or appetizers, as in western restaurants. It is polite to allow the host to order the dishes and to be invited to start the meal. Initial offers of food or drink should not be refused. After the meal, guests are expected to stay involved in conversations to further build relationships.

Gift-giving traditions differ according to the various ethnic and religious groups. At the Chinese New Year, it is customary to give a gift of money in a red envelope to children. The gift is called '*hang bao*' and is given in even amounts using new currency bills. It is also common to give mandarins or oranges in even numbers upon arrival to a host's residence. The number '8' is a lucky number and the number '4' is a bad omen. This should be considered when planning a gift for a Chinese counterpart. A gift to avoid is a clock as the clock symbolises the burial of a relative. Other items associated with funerals are straw sandals, white candles and joss sticks (which are incense sticks traditionally burnt before religious images, idols or shrines in Asian cultures).

Since they are believed to be auspicious, odd numbers are appropriate when giving gifts to Hindus. It is best to avoid giving leather products (especially cow leather) to observant Hindus as the cow is a sacred animal in Hinduism. Giving alcohol may not be suitable unless one is certain that the recipient drinks. Appropriate gifts for Muslim hosts are flowers, sweets or toys for the children. Items to be avoided when giving gifts to observant Muslims are alcohol, perfumes containing alcohol, pork, pigskin products, toy dogs or gifts with pictures of pigs. While most Muslims consider the saliva of a dog to be impure and do not have dogs in their houses (many prefer to keep dogs outside the house), Muslims in general agree that all parts of a pig are *haram* (forbidden to Muslims) and therefore would consider it inappropriate to have even as a toy. Foodstuff offered as presents to Muslim households should be '*halal*' (meaning permissible for Muslims).

As Singapore prides itself as the most corruption-free country in Asia, business gifts are generally not exchanged with government staff. A welcome or thank you gift can be offered

provided it is not an expensive item. A gift may be refused before being accepted as a polite gesture of not appearing to be 'greedy' and it is all right to insist on its acceptance and show pleasure when a gift is accepted. A gift may not be opened in front of a guest and the recipient may briefly thank the giver and put the gift aside.

Modest dressing is required when visiting places of worship and shoes must be removed on entering a Buddhist or Hindu temple or a Muslim mosque. Public displays of affection are not appropriate in such places. Staff at places of worship are generally accommodating to visitors and may overlook minor indiscretions, but it is always better to show respect and abide by the protocols of behaviour at these places.

The common working week in Singapore is five days from Monday to Friday, though some companies work a half day on Saturdays. Standard business hours are 9 am to 6 pm. Shops, supermarkets and malls are open seven days a week and on most public holidays. There are restaurants, pharmacies and clinics that are open 24 hours. Most businesses that are not in the service industry are only open 5 days per week.

DAYS AND TIMES OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

New Year's Day – the 1st of January is a national holiday in Singapore.

Chinese New Year – The Chinese calendar is a lunisolar calendar, therefore the dates change each year.

Good Friday - a global Christian observance two days before Easter Sunday is a public holiday in Singapore.

Labour Day – the 1st of May called Labour Day is a national holiday in Singapore.

Vesak or Wesak Day – a day traditionally observed by Buddhists marks the birthday of the Buddha.

Hari Raya Puasa - marks the end of the Islamic fasting month of Ramadhan.

National Day - The National Day of Singapore is celebrated on August 9, in commemoration of the Singapore's independence from Malaysia in the year 1965

Hari Raya Haji – marks the festival of the sacrifice. On this day, Muslims sacrifice animals and distribute meat to the needy to commemorate the Prophet Ibrahim's (Abraham) faith in God tested by asking him to sacrifice his son.

Deepavali - is the Hindu festival of lights that signifies the victory of light over darkness, or good over evil.

Christmas Day – the 25th of December is a public holiday in Singapore to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

CONDUCT SUBJECT TO LEGAL PENALTIES

Misconduct in the public space: Singapore has strict regulations about preserving public peace and order. Offences pertaining to misconduct in the public space include:

Affray – Affray is a term for two or more people engaging in a scuffle or a tussle that disturbs public peace. If found committing affray, a person can be subject to arrest without a warrant and can be charged for a term extending one year or be fined; or both.

Jaywalking - Jaywalking is defined as crossing the road within fifty meters of a crossing zone, and is commonly policed. Police can target locations randomly and jaywalkers can be fined on the spot or even face a jail sentence.

Littering – Littering is commonly policed and the police can arrest people for such offences. Offenders discarding minor litter such as sweet wrappers are liable for a small fine and improper disposal of large items such as plastic bags, drink cups and food wrappers can be issued larger fines, be ordered to do community work; or both. Offenders are required to wear clothing that identifies them as 'litterbugs' while cleaning up areas to bring shame and ensure they do not repeat such offenses.

Being drunk in the public – Being drunk to the extent that a person is not capable of taking care of one's speech, balance coordination, or behaviour that is noticeably irregular due to the consumption of alcohol, is an offence and can be charged with a fine or a prison sentence.

Outrage of modesty: 'Outrage of modesty' is defined as inappropriate behaviour towards another including using inappropriate language and improper touching. While the offence can be committed by men or women, it is mostly males who have been convicted for transgressions of this nature. Penalties include imprisonment, fines, corporal punishment (caning) or a combination of these. 'Outrage of modesty' offences committed against domestic maids or aggravated by religious or racial hostility carry enhanced penalties.

Drugs possession: Singapore has some of the strictest laws on drug-related offences. Punishments differ in severity depending on the class of controlled substance. The presence of illegal drugs detected in blood and/or urine tests constitutes an offence. One can be prosecuted for consumption of drugs even if they were taken outside Singapore. Penalties for drug offences are severe and include the death penalty. Under Singapore's Misuse of Drugs Act, drug-trafficking carries a mandatory death sentence. Van Tuong Nguyen, a Vietnamese-Australian convicted for drug-trafficking in Singapore was hanged in December 2005. Despite pleas for clemency from the Australian government, Amnesty International, the Holy See, as well as individuals and groups, he was executed by hanging.

LGBTIQ+ issues: LGBTIQ+ rights are severely restricted in Singapore. Same-sex relationships of any form (such as marriage, civil union, domestic partnership) are not recognized under the law, and the adoption of children by same-sex couples is illegal. Sexual relations between two male persons are a criminal offense with a penalty of up to two years imprisonment. Same-sex marriage is prohibited; however transgender people who have undergone sex-reassignment surgery may legally marry a person of the opposite sex.

Alcohol: It is illegal to consume alcohol in public places between 10.30pm and 7am. There are specified areas designated as Liquor Control Zones where additional restrictions are

imposed for weekends and public holidays. Liquor-related offences committed within these zones can result in a higher penalty; one-and-a-half times that in non-designated areas. Driving under the influence of alcohol is a serious offence in Singapore. Alcohol consumption offences can apply on airline carriers registered in Singapore and inbound Singapore-owned carriers. Airline passengers, who become intoxicated, behave badly or use offensive language during a flight may be arrested on arrival in Singapore. Similar behaviour in transit may also lead to arrest.

Imports: It is an offence to enter or transit through Singapore with weapons, military souvenirs, replica weapons and ammunition (including empty cartridges). The importation of pirated copyright material is prohibited. Offenders can be fined or jailed; or both. Some printed and recorded material that is legal in Australia may be considered obscene and prohibited under Singaporean law. Except for therapeutic purposes (such as giving up smoking or dental reasons), there is a ban on importing chewing gum into Singapore which is strictly enforced. Gum can be bought from a doctor, but must be prescribed. For details, visit the Singapore Customs website.

Corporal punishment: A legacy of British colonial rule, the use of corporal punishment with a rattan cane for many offences is common in Singapore. Singaporean law allows caning for over 35 offences, including hostage-taking/kidnapping, robbery, gang robbery with murder, rioting, causing grievous hurt, drug abuse, vandalism, extortion, sexual abuse, and unlawful possession of weapons. Caning is also a mandatory punishment for certain offences such as rape, drug trafficking, illegal money lending, and for foreigners who overstay by more than 90 days – a measure designed to deter illegal immigrants. The Criminal Procedure Code lays down the procedures for caning. Women and men above the age of 50 are not caned in Singapore.

Singapore Arrest is a free downloadable application that can guide individuals through the criminal law process in Singapore.

TRAVEL INFORMATION AND VISAS

Up to date information on travel, safety precautions and visa requirements is available on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website Smartraveller:
<http://smartraveller.gov.au/Countries/asia/south-east/Pages/singapore.aspx>

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