

transcript

mobility matters, episode 9: singapore spotlight – part two, immigration and schooling

WITH PIERS MATTHEWS, EISEN ESERJOSE, AND JOCELYN TAN



Eisen:

Hello, and welcome to Mobility Matters. I'm Eisen Eserjose and I will be your host for today. I'm from Cartus' Global Learning and Development team. Today's a follow up episode on Singapore as an assignee destination, and in today's episode, we will take a deep dive into Singapore immigration and schooling challenges with our subject matter experts. First to join us will be Piers Matthews. Hi, Piers.

Piers:

Hi, Eisen. Thanks for having me.

Eisen:

Piers Matthews is the Director of Admissions and Marketing at Dulwich College in Singapore. He has 12 years of experience in the international education sector and he was Founding Director of Admissions and Marketing at Wellington College in Hangzhou, China, prior to joining the Dulwich College International family in 2020. Welcome to Mobility Matters, Piers.

Piers:

Yes, my pleasure. Thanks so much for having me what an honor it is to join the podcast today. Thank you.

Eisen:

The honor is ours. Also, we have Jocelyn Tan, Cartus' Destination and Real Estate Services Manager. Hi, Jocelyn.

Jocelyn:

Hi Eisen!

Eisen:

Jocelyn manages the Destination and Immigration Services team in Singapore. She has been with Cartus for nine years now and is well versed in relocation expatriates. Thank you for joining us today, Jocelyn.

Jocelyn:

Thank you for having me as well.

Eisen:

I know we have discussed this in the previous episode, where Singapore is a popular assignee destination for companies given its location, diverse population and stable infrastructure. But when employees relocate with families, children's schooling will fall into one of the top concerns they have. Can we give our listeners a preview of what the education landscape of Singapore schooling is Jocelyn, based on your team's experience.

Jocelyn:

The landscape of schools in Singapore is diverse, and we do offer a range of options. So, we have three categories of schools in Singapore, we have the local schools that provide education mainly to Singapore citizens and permanent residents. And they follow the ministry of education curricula, which includes subjects like English, math, science, mother tongue language, and usually after completing the primary schools, the students will proceed on to secondary school to complete their GCSE/O-level examinations. And once they graduate, they will have the option to either enrol in junior colleges, or polytechnics for pre-university education respectively.

Then we have the second category, which is private schools. They offer an alternative education pathway in Singapore, catering to both local and international students. So, they do have a variety of curriculums, such as the International Baccalaureate, or the Cambridge A-levels. So, this is more flexible and a diverse range of programs to provide an attractive option for students who don't fit into the traditional local education system.

The third category that we have are the international schools. So, these cater primarily to expatriate families, and they follow the foreign curriculum. They have the advanced placement system as well as the international curriculum, and they have a more diverse student body as compared to local schools.

It's important to note that we do have a high quality education system in Singapore, for both the local and international schools. And the choice of schools really depend on the family's specific needs, like the child's nationality, educational goals, as well as personal preferences. Tuition fees for such schools can vary widely, and is also another factor for families making the decision on which course to enrol their children in.

Eisen:

Now, this question goes to Piers. Can you tell us what are the admission requirements that international schools commonly look for?

Piers:

Yeah, absolutely. And as Jocelyn has just shared, Singapore is pretty famous for its schooling and for its education. In terms of international schools, Singapore has more than 50 schools

covering a range of different curricula. You've got your IB diploma program curriculum, I-GCSE, A-levels, as well as a lot of different national curricula, so you may have Australian or Japanese or German curricula. So, there's a huge variety of international schools, and Singapore's famous for having some of the very best international schools in the world.

As a result of this, the admissions requirements and criteria are going to vary pretty significantly amongst the different types of schools. So, some of the schools are very academically selective, and there'll be very strict criteria on academics and testing requirements. Some of them are not, some of them are higher tuition fees, some are more affordable. So in general, I think, while the different criteria will depend based on the school that you choose, and the curriculum that you're going for some of the things in general, I think that all schools are looking for parents who are engaged in the process, they have done their research, they understand the school that they're applying for, and they know why they've chosen it. And I think schools would like parents to be able to articulate how their school's values align with the parents and the family and their desires for their children.

Definitely, we want to see students who are engaged in that admissions process, they're enthusiastic, they will take advantage of all the different opportunities, whether that's academic, curricular, or social language is a big factor. So, depending on the school, the language abilities of your child will come into play. Some schools have English as an additional language or English as a second language provision, and will be able to support children with a wide range of language ability, but some will expect children to have much stronger English language before they join. So that's, in a nutshell, I think, covers some of the broader areas that parents should be thinking about.

Eisen:

Thank you so much for sharing that, Piers. So, what are the unique qualifications that Dulwich is looking for with their students?

Piers:

Yes, absolutely. So, Dulwich College, Singapore, probably falls into the line of being an academically selective school, we are known for our academic rigor, but also in providing a really holistic, well-rounded education with many, many opportunities for the children. And we're also well known for developing global citizenship. So really, those future ready skills that are going to help students thrive not only at school, but also in university and then beyond, in their careers. So, to that end, we are seeking to build a community of like-minded people who share these values, we definitely want families and parents who are seeking that type of an education. And they're aligned with our values and our guiding statements. It's always great when we have parents who are engaged in that admissions process and are enthusiastic about meeting our team and getting to know the school, learning about what we offer.

It is important to us that at least one parent is relatively fluent in English, because English is the language of our community. And it's really important that parents can communicate with our teachers, with our academic or our support staff, and the admissions process. So, we definitely want at least one parent to be quite a fluent English speaker, we do want families who are going to contribute to our community, attend events, support with activities, and build that overall feeling of community that we that we all love so much.

In terms of the children themselves, we are definitely looking for academic ability, we want to see students who are academically robust and have a strong potential. But beyond that, we do look at this process really holistically. So we're looking for students that have a really clear passion and skills, whether they're really into sport, or art or music, or dance or computer science, whatever it is, we'd love to see children who have these really clear passions that shine through and students that are willing to be individuals, right, willing to be themselves let themselves shine, show off what their unique contribution to the college culture will be.

So, I wouldn't like to share the criteria as, "You must meet 'X point' on a scale." Of course, we have admissions testing, and our students do undertake different tests when they come in as part of the admissions process. But broadly, I'd like to more focus on the general attributes of the parents and the students who are joining.

Eisen:

That sounds very intense, actually. But can you take us through what typically happens on the admissions procedure like what parents and or children would typically need to prepare? Or what schools offer, like specifically your school, to help prospective students and their parents decide on the school that's right for them like a good fit?

Piers:

Yeah, absolutely. I don't want people to think that the process is intense. So that might have sounded like a lot. But, you know, rest assured that the admissions teams in all of the schools, the admissions team are there to support you and hundreds and thousands of people have been through that process. So, definitely when you jump on a school's website, and you open up their admissions page, and it's going to have this long checklist of things you need to prepare, and as a new family coming in, that can be really intense and overwhelming. I wouldn't worry about that just yet. The admissions team is there to support parents through that, where they're collecting documents, submitting report cards, doing the entrance exams, and that comes later.

First of all, I think the most important thing is that families have a chance to really make sure that the school that they're applying for is the school that fits them, right, that fits them and their child's needs. So definitely coming for a campus tour, having a conversation with the admissions team. We host open houses every single week. So, every Wednesday morning, our head of college is there to greet families and talk about what makes our school special. And I'm sure all schools offer some version of this. I just think that it's really important that the families take the time to walk around the school, get a feel for it, see students in the classroom learning, right, see their happy faces, meet teachers, meet the staff, and make sure that the schools that they're going for match with their values and what they're looking for.

Eisen:

So, they will be getting a lot of help from Cartus, from their relocation management company, and from school as well. Right, you said that you do like weekly school tours, consultations, and you talk to the parents, you walk them through the documents that they would need to pass, right?

Piers:

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, beyond that, there's also we have a program, a platform on our website, that parents can actually reach out to existing parents. So, they don't need to speak to someone in the admissions team. Maybe they'd rather speak to someone, a parent in the school that has children of the same age or from the same nationality. And they just want to know what it would be like coming in from that perspective. And then that means that when they join the school, they've already got friends within the community. The admissions team actually play a really important role, because they're helping families through quite an intense and stressful period in their life, you're moving to Singapore, you not only have to find a school for your children, you're probably looking for a house or an apartment, you might be starting a new role in a job, that's a lot of pressure. So, what we want to do is take that pressure off and try to make at least one aspect of the schooling as pleasant as possible.

Eisen:

That actually sounds really great. Like they would get to meet other parents ahead of time. But I think one of the things that they're anxious about would be availability. So, what's the current school application volume, the availability, and how early is too early to apply? How late is too late already? So, can you go ahead and give us an idea?

Piers:

Yes, sure. It's a good question. And how early is too early? You know, sometimes we have families coming for an open house where the mother is still pregnant with the baby. So, they're looking years in advance, which I always say kudos to them for that really, as soon as you can. As soon as you know that you're moving to Singapore. That is when you really should start doing that research, narrowing down the school to a shortlist or hopefully visiting Singapore and visiting some of those schools in person. I'm sure you also want to do some house hunting. So, try to set aside a good three or four days to get accustomed to the country. See the schools, get a feel for the transport, the location, what that's all going to look like, at the end of the day.

As we've shared before, Singapore is a very popular destination. It's a melting pot of cultures. It's vibrant, it's stable, it's got great food. It's a lovely place to live. And so, it's

a popular destination for expats. And as a result, schools generally have high demand. Absolutely. We do have waitlists, and we're near capacity in many of our year levels. But the point is the waitlist moves. So as an international school and I'm sure all of the schools are in a similar situation. As an international school, families come and go all the time, families get relocated for work, they need to leave for various reasons. And so, while we do operate a waitlist in many year groups, that waitlist can move quite quickly. So I wouldn't want parents necessarily to be discouraged by that. On the contrary, I just recommend families to reach out as soon as they can get into the process, get onto that admissions process as early as they can when they know that they're moving to Singapore. And then the rest should follow.

Eisen:

So, any last few tips for parents, as you are a parent yourself having a daughter, any tips or assignees moving to Singapore?

Piers:

Yes sure, absolutely. I guess my main tip would be for parents to try to make this a positive experience for their child. Moving to a new school can always be really daunting. And we don't want families to feel as though they're preparing their child for an exam, it can be quite scary to go in and do a test or do an exam. And in our school, we do ask children to record a short one or two minute video to introduce themselves, which can also be daunting. I would encourage parents to talk their child through the process, put them at ease, make them not feel as though it's such a scary process, they should enjoy it.

Moving to a new country and moving to a new school is already challenging enough for children. Transitions is one of the most challenging things that a child can go through. We're here to support children through transition processes. But we also want to work with parents and try to make the admissions process and coming to a new school as positive as it possibly can be for children.

Eisen:

Thank you so much. And just as an additional question, what does the demographic of students' nationalities in Singapore look like? If you could give us an idea of your school specifically.

Piers:

Yes, sure, absolutely. Singapore is fascinating, because it is just so diverse and multicultural. And different schools will have a different diversity mix based on their curricula and where they're located. And you know, the history and the heritage of the school. And for us, we have over 30% of our students are British. And then the rest of those students make up 50-plus nationalities. So, we're a really diverse community. And we're really proud of that, we love the fact that our student population is very diverse. And we feel that that gives this genuinely international experience that helps students become global citizens.

So, I can't speak for other schools. But what I can say is that Singapore in general, is just a very diverse and multicultural place. And as a parent, bringing your child into that environment, you're doing the right thing for them, you're giving them this amazing experience that is going to last them for the rest of their life. They're going to open up new horizons and make friends from all over the world and build these memories that will last them for the rest of their life.

Eisen:

And how does Dulwich partner with RMCs like Cartus for a smooth application or planning for an assignees' children when it comes to school application?

Piers:

It's a good question. I think teams like Cartus have really good processes and are the experts in supporting families through everything. And schooling is just one part of that. What we try to do is just have really open lines of communication with the Cartus team. So, if they have a new family coming on, they know that they can pick up the phone and get in touch with someone. We can arrange these personalized tours upon request, if someone from the Cartus team reached out to us, so it's essentially about having an open line of communication with the team.

Eisen:

Thank you so much for your speaking of Cartus and RMCs. We have Jocelyn, because I would want to talk about immigration now. Now, Jocelyn, tell us what the new Singapore immigration landscape is.

Jocelyn:

Right. So this year, we do have quite a bit of changes with the Ministry of Manpower, introducing a new work pass as well as a new framework for the application of the employment pass. And so, we're here today to give you all the details of the new changes that might help you and your company plan ahead in terms of recruitment.

So, the first step we have is the One Pass, which is a new pass for high earners who have a fixed monthly salary of SG\$30,000, or is equivalent in foreign currency for the last consecutive 12 months for either an established company overseas or in Singapore, or are expected to earn a fixed monthly salary of at least \$30,000. In an established perspective company in Singapore.

Another criteria would be if the high achievers in outstanding achievement in sports, arts, and culture or academia and research. So, one of the key features of this pass is that it has a longer pass duration of five years as compared to the employment pass, which has only a maximum of three years pass duration. Another feature of it is that the One Pass is an individual pass that allows this pass holder to concurrently start, operate, and work for multiple companies at any one time as compared to the employment pass which is tied to a single employer.

So, this one pass also grants the passholder exemption from the framework, as well as the fair consideration and framework dropped advertising requirements. It also gives a spouse who's on a dependent pass the option to apply for a letter of consent, which will allow them to work in Singapore, the application can be done by the passholders themselves or by their prospective or current employers just note the issuance has to be done in person by the passholders themselves.

So apart from the One Pass, we also have the COMPASS framework, which is a new eligibility criterion imposed by MRA to ensure all candidates are considered fairly, so this COMPASS framework consists of a two-stage framework. So, we have stage one, which is the qualifying salary and stage two on the framework itself, which requires the companies and individuals to fulfil certain criteria such as education, qualification, nationality, salary, and support for local employment. So, candidates will have to fulfil that minimum salary requirement. According to the Ministry of Manpower's salary gauge, as well as score a minimum of 40 points on the COMPASS river, in order to be eligible to submit an application for the employment pass.

There is also a bonus criteria that the companies can use to achieve bonus points to the prospective candidates and partners can assist, you know, to advise the companies on what this bonus criteria is, so that the companies can tap into this for their employees.

Eisen:

I see. Thank you so much. That's One Pass and COMPASS. Right. With these new frameworks, can you share some of the challenges or the experience by the companies that you're working with or by your team directly?

Jocelyn:

Sure. So far, the COMPASS framework is largely dependent on the companies and the individual candidates' eligibility to get the required points. So, one of the challenges is if the company does not have good standing, in terms of their local payment scores, that means their support for local employment. So, if they don't have the good scores for this category, then they would have to hire a candidate with higher qualifications, as well as pay the benchmark salary in order to fulfil the 40 points requirements.

So, one of the other challenges would be that with the COMPASS framework, any education that is declared in the application has to be accompanied by an education verification document. And this process can take four to six weeks, or sometimes longer if the candidate's schools are unresponsive. And this can really set back the application date for the employment pass, as well as the start date for the employee. And for companies who do not meet the point

requirements, they might have to consider hiring the candidate under an S Pass instead of an employment pass. And for such cases, one of the challenges that companies would face would be that they might not have the quota eligible to hire an S Plus employee.

Eisen:

I see. But so, can you share some of the best practices for our listeners, client companies out there so that they could mitigate this challenges or potential challenges that you've mentioned?

Eisen:

Right. So, for Cartus, usually, we will advise the clients to plan ahead to initiate the past application process as soon as they have tentative start date for the candidates. Because right now, with the COMPASS framework, there's a longer application time required for the employment pass application. And you will also need to do a self-assessment check on the candidate to ensure that they have the eligible points for COMPASS.

And there is also additional time required to conduct the education verification checks, as well. So, all these contribute to additional time required for the whole process. So, we always ask the clients to start the application process earlier if possible. And at Cartus we do conduct immigration roadshows as well to brief our clients, and their recruitment teams on the new process as well as requirements. So, this helps the client to understand the new changes, and to plan ahead for the employees. And we also provide the status updates on active applications and advice on the renewal process for our clients.

Eisen:

Thank you so much, Jocelyn, for that, but that is all the time that we have for now. So I would like to take this opportunity to thank Piers for joining us today. Thank you so much, Piers.

Piers:

Yeah, absolutely. My pleasure. Thanks so much Eisen. And good luck to everybody out there planning their move to Singapore. What an exciting time.

Eisen:

Yeah, thank you so much, Jocelyn, as well for that very insightful sharing on the new framework for immigration.

Jocelyn:

Thank you Eisen, thank you, Piers.

Eisen:

This wraps up part two of our Singapore Spotlight series. We hope you enjoyed our time today. If you missed the first episode on real estate and standard of living in Singapore, you may listen to it on Cartus.com. If you're interested in learning more about what we've discussed today, feel free to email us at cartussolutions@cartus.com for an extensive resource library. Thank you.

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