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Want 'different' discussion? Stop by at the Kopitiam

Group formed by four overseas graduates hopes to get people talking informally and spontaneously about political issues

By [Tan Tarn How](#)

A BAND of four twenty-somethings called the Kopitiam Discussion Group wants Singaporeans to be more active citizens - and is doing it by getting them to talk more.

In their mid-20s, the Singaporean graduates from foreign universities have been arranging what they bill as 'discussions with a difference' on political issues such as streaming and censorship.

They also hope to take the discussions to schools to help students become more questioning and aware of issues, Ms Chan Li Han told The Straits Times.

One of the self-professed 'crazy' people behind the group, she graduated from Stanford University in the United States last year and is now an international marketing executive with Singapore Technologies Engineering.

The other three are not ready to reveal their identities yet.

The Kopitiam idea was hatched at Stanford University in 2000 when Singaporean students, including Singapore Government scholarship holders, got together and organised discussions.

'Reading materials were distributed, notable guest speakers were invited, but it was the free food that drew in the hungry students,' joked Ms Chan.

Now back home, the four have applied to register their group as a company limited by guarantee and eventually obtain charity status.

They hope to step up activities when approval is given and will employ full-time staff by next year, though success will hinge on people giving their time to be organisers, facilitators and panellists, Ms Chan said.

The group is now looking for funding and is recruiting members.

They have held three discussions since April, on Singapore's position on the Iraq war, whether censorship is worth the trouble in a post-Sept 11 world, and whether streaming is increasing the social divide.

The guest speakers were sociologist Kwok Kian Woon, theatre director and activist Alvin Tan and former Raffles Girls' School principal Carmee Lim.

So far, between 10 and 25 people have attended each discussion, Ms Chan said.

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For its school programme, the group hopes to get secondary schools and tertiary institutions to sign on.

Ms Chan said the name 'Kopitiam' captures the informality and spontaneity the group wants the discussions to characterise.

The group says a Kopitiam discussion is different because it is 'an open and engaging discussion held among informed, active participants who exchange information, opinions and ideas'.

It does this by providing reading material for participants on its website (www.kopitiam.org) and by using trained facilitators in the discussions.

It also says it is different from civil society groups, such as political discussion group The Roundtable, which tend to have closed-door, 'rather intellectual' discussions among members only.

The group hopes that, after the discussions, 'some might start acting and contributing to the betterment of society or, at the very least, start leading thoughtful lives'.

Although Kopitiam hopes to spur participants to become activists, it is careful that it is not seen as anti-establishment.

Said Ms Chan: 'We are concerned that we might be misunderstood.'

'Kopitiam sessions are not intended to work for or against the establishment, but are part of the process towards a more vibrant society.'

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