

Poly graduates should get their upgrade

A

FFORDABILITY as a grievance issue is not confined to state housing. The fate of polytechnic diploma graduates who wish to acquire university degrees, but have limited access to the universities here, is also shaping up as an affordability question. Unlike property, over which unhappiness will abate as soon as the market dips and prices moderate, the paper chase is a drawn-out matter and getting more intense. Grouses can be expected to rise in pitch. About 4,000 poly graduates unable to obtain places here go abroad each year for their degrees, at considerable expense. The cost is many times more (in Britain, about \$50,000 a year for tuition, books and living costs). How high the percent-

age is of households which cannot afford the expenditure but make the sacrifice for their children anyway, can only be guessed at. Frequent letters on the subject in our Forum page is indicative of a significant incidence.

Poly graduates aspiring to higher specialised qualifications should be a “happy” problem as it validates the high academic standards of a supposedly vocational system. It also enriches the manpower. Something else happened which has raised the expectations of the poly student body. More O-level students who qualified for junior college (33 per cent, against 29 per cent five years ago) are choosing the three-year poly diploma route as they receive a highly mar-

ketable certificate besides gaining an advantage in university technical courses. Poly is now just another path to university, no different from junior college.

Meeting their expectations adequately is just a different way of saying families should not get into debt sending their hopefuls overseas. The social impact can be lasting and debilitating. Only about 2,500 diploma holders won places last year in the three universities, out of a total undergraduate enrolment of 15,000. Can they admit more of those who satisfy the admissions criteria? NUS, NTU and the city-located Singapore Management University are said to have reached the limits of expansion. Are satellite campuses a viable option?

The new Singapore Institute of Technology will absorb about 1,500 students for degree programmes of approved foreign universities. This is the brightest prospect as there is room for expansion in space as well as courses of study.

Polytechnics’ arrangements with foreign partners under the poly-foreign specialised institutes scheme should not be let to shrivel as a result but continue to grow. This is another absorption route, as long as suitable partner institutions for desired specialisations can be found. Availability of places must be increased to the maximum possible if, as thought, the new Singapore University of Technology and Design could be scaled too high for diploma applicants.