



# Expand varsity places, but not at expense of quality

Poly officials stress need to consider cohort participation rate

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POLYTECHNIC upgraders yearn for a university degree at home but their ambitions will not be met by the promised 2,000 additional places alone, say polytechnic principals.

The rising calibre and aspirations of their students will push up demand further, they explained.

With these additional places, 20 per cent of polytechnic graduates will have a shot at university education locally.

In contrast, their peers who take the A-level route have greater access, with more than 70 per cent given a university place at home.

The principals were responding to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's announcement on Sunday that there will be a gradual increase of 2,000 more university places for Singaporeans here by 2015.

As a result, there will be 14,000 places for Singaporeans in 2015, up from 12,000 this year and 9,000 a decade ago, he said in his National Day Rally speech.

The economy will need more graduates, and as schools and polytechnics produce more students with the grades and who can gain from a university education, Mr Lee said: "I think we should allow as many as possible to

have that opportunity."

He added that the Education Ministry is studying how best to do this and it may be not just from expanding existing universities.

Polytechnic principals say these are timely moves.

They point out that the rising calibre of their students is evident in the growing number who opt for the three-year diploma route even though they qualify for junior college (JC).

According to Education Ministry figures, about 33 per cent of the O-level youngsters who qualified for JC chose a polytechnic instead. Five years ago, only 29 per cent of JC-eligible students took the poly route.

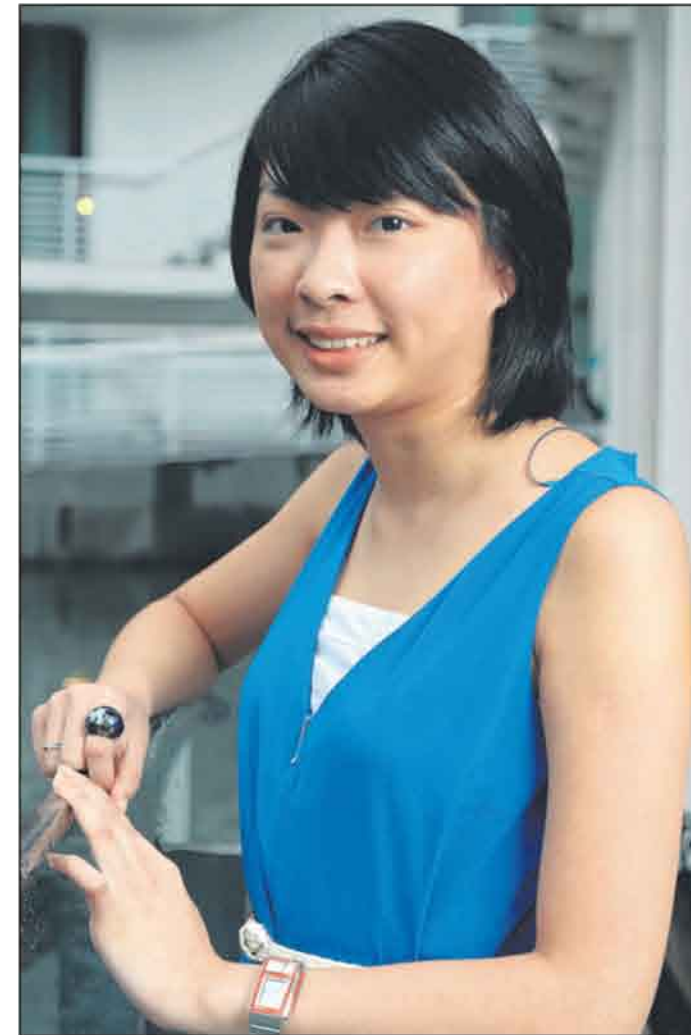
At Ngee Ann and Singapore polytechnics, which take in the best O-level holders, six in 10 students had qualified for JC.

Singapore Polytechnic principal Tan Hang Cheong notes that the aspirations of polytechnic students have also gone up.

"The majority of them now see polytechnics as a step to university, instead of the final stop," he said.

This is borne out in the annual employment surveys of Ngee Ann Polytechnic. In 2000, only half of its graduates indicated they would pursue a degree immediately on graduation or, among males, after national service. Now, almost all said they plan to pursue a degree right after graduation.

But while calling for more places to be opened up, polytechnic officials stopped short of spelling out what proportion of Singaporeans should be given places in the local universities, termed



Republic Polytechnic graduate Doris Ng, 20, was one of those who could not land a place at a local university to study business even though she achieved top grades. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

He has a son and a daughter who went to a polytechnic though they qualified for JC.

Polytechnic graduates like Doris Ng, 20, who could not land a university place locally, echoed his comments.

Despite a high Grade Point Average of 3.79, the Republic Polytechnic student failed to land a place to study business at NUS, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University.

Now, she has to work for a few years to save before heading overseas. "I graduated among the top of my class but even that is not enough to get me a place locally."

Like her, other polytechnic upgraders shut out of the local universities head overseas or take the private school route.

Polytechnic officials, though, agreed with PM Lee that the additional places need not come from expanding the existing universities.

Singapore Polytechnic principal Mr Tan said that if indeed the Government decides to offer more places, the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), which has proven popular with polytechnic graduates, could absorb more students. The institute, which offers two-year degree courses with reputed overseas universities, had 4,000 students vying for the 1,000 places it offered this year.

But Mr Tan said SIT must continue to ensure its partner institutions are top-notch. "This way polytechnic students will have good job prospects. Whatever we do, there must be no let-up on quality."

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the cohort participation rate. They stressed that the Government must consider the issue carefully as there should be no compromise of quality for quantity.

Said Republic Polytechnic principal Yeo Li Pheow: "We don't want a situation where graduates end up having to take on lower-level jobs."

Polytechnic graduates and their parents, on the other hand, called on the Government to expand university places for as many as 40 per cent of a cohort.

Currently, 25 per cent of a Primary 1 cohort make it to the local universities but the figure will rise to 30 per cent by 2015.

Mr Andy Tan, 48, a shop manager, echoed the views of several other parents when he said: "O-level or a poly diploma just won't do any more. A degree is the minimum basic to a good job and comfortable life."

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