New committee to develop, expand varsity sector

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SINGAPORE — Issues such as the oft-heard call for more university places for polytechnic students, and the need for more scholarships to prepare Singaporeans in emerging fields, will now be looked at by a newly-convened committee set up to develop and expand the university sector up to 2020 and beyond.

Chaired by Minister of State (Education & Defence) Lawrence Wong, the Committee to Review University Education Pathways Beyond 2015 will study how to expand the university sector in four key areas: More places, more scholarships, especially in emerging fields, increased training and upgrading, and preparing students for the global economy.

New scholarships, for instance, will groom Singaporeans for positions in the private sector, said Education Minister Heng Swee Keat when he announced the committee yesterday. “The majority of these (public sector scholarships) are to groom talent for their own agencies. These (new scholarships) will not be for the public sector, but to nurture a strong core of Singaporean talent with the requisite skills to anchor our key current and emerging economic and social sectors,” he said.

Students should also be groomed with “global orientation and cultural competencies”, as such students will command a “premium” with their ability to operate across diverse cultures and strong networks in the region, he said.

The formation of the committee comes days after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, on Sunday, flagged the need to expand university intakes further beyond the 2,000 additional places coming on-stream over the next four years.

A “big chunk” of the 2,000 places will go to the Singapore Institute of Technology, while the publicly-funded universities and other tertiary institutions like the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts — will all see places added, said Mr Wong.

And by 2015, 30 per cent of each Primary 1 cohort — or around 14,000 Singaporeans — will have places in one of the four publicly-funded universities.

While the assessment is that the numbers can be increased further, Mr Heng noted it “cannot be a numbers game alone”. “It has to be a strategic approach, responding to the needs of the economy,” he said.

As for the number of university places going to foreign students, Mr Heng said the proportion will fall to about 15 per cent to 16 per cent from the present 18 per cent, when enrolment levels are capped as announced by Mr Lee.

 Asked how many foreign students actually stay on to work in Singapore after they graduate from a local university, Mr Heng said that over 80 per cent serve out their bond.

The review will be carried out by a mix of private and government players and recommendations will be submitted to the Government by the end of next year.