

# More new varsity places for poly grads

## New degree programmes must be relevant to industry: Lawrence Wong

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**HELSINKI:** When the Government expands the university sector to give places to more than 30 per cent of students from each cohort, more of these places will go to polytechnic graduates, said Minister of

State for Education Lawrence Wong.

But it must ensure that the new degree programmes remain relevant to the industry and focus on hands-on practice.

"We have to think of providing a university pathway that will build on the strengths of their polytechnic education and allow them to maximise their poten-

tial in areas they are good at," he added.

Doing so will ensure that these students enjoy good job prospects when they graduate, he noted on Wednesday, after visiting two Finnish universities.

As it was, he noted, employers appreciated the fact that Singapore's polytechnics offered courses that were relevant to the industry and were practice-oriented, making them attractive in the job market.

Mr Wong, who heads a committee looking at ways to provide Singaporeans with more university places, is on a study trip to Finland and France to look at uni-

versity education in Europe.

By 2015, Singapore's four universities, together with the Singapore Institute of Technology, which offers degrees for polytechnic upgraders, will be able to take in 14,000 Singaporeans each year.

This means 30 per cent of each Primary 1 cohort will get to go to a local university.

By then, 20 per cent of each polytechnic cohort will be given places in these universities, up from the current 15 per cent. More than 70 per cent of junior college students go on to local universities.

Mr Wong said: "The larger proportion of the people who will benefit from this expansion of the university sector will be the poly graduates."

On Wednesday, he and his delegation visited the research-intensive University of Helsinki and the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, referred to as a "polytechnic" in the Finnish system.

The first university offers a five-year track for students aiming to graduate with bachelor's and master's degrees, while the second offers more job-specific, four-year degree programmes in areas

ranging from engineering and IT to nursing.

Mr Wong said one of the strong points of the Finnish university system was that it offered two distinct tracks to young Finns - one more "job specific and vocational" and the other more "academic".

Graduates from both universities were sought after by employers, with those from the University of Helsinki heading to the public sector and those from Metropolia getting private sector jobs.

He said creating these distinctive tracks to nurture different types of graduates was an "important point to bear in mind" for the 15-member university review committee.

He also noted that if the committee, at the end of the review, recommends setting up a new university, it is "more likely" to be a teaching university, rather than a research-oriented one like the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University.

He added that the committee has to ask itself if Singapore needs more research universities or if a "teaching university" would serve the needs of the students and employers better.

He said the Finnish system also offered a "reality check" to the committee. He noted that Finland, with its 16 research universities and 25 applied sciences universities, offered places to 65 per cent of a Primary 1 cohort. But in the end, one in four failed to graduate with a degree.

As university education is free here, the remaining students took, on average, seven years to complete the five-year bachelor's and master's degree track.

This was a problem even in its leading university, the University of Helsinki, which is consistently ranked among the world's top 100 universities. It takes in 4,000 students a year but only 2,600 graduate annually.

Mr Wong noted: "So participation rate is one thing, but the actual attainment rate is lower. The Finns have made it a generous, flexible system with no dead ends, but it has created problems of its own."

He also said that if Singapore wanted to set up new universities to offer more places, then it must ensure that they were sustainable and of high quality.

Mr Wong, who is accompanied by the committee members and Ministry of Education officials, is also visiting French universities, including the Paris Sorbonne University and Sciences Po. The committee will submit its report by the end of next year.

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