

Value of varsity education will remain: Lawrence Wong

Govt to ensure quality of degrees even with more university places

By AMELIA TAN

AS THE Government expands the university sector to provide more university places for Singaporeans, it will ensure that degrees remain prized by employers.

Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong gave this assurance yesterday after participants at a townhall meeting to discuss the expansion of the university sector expressed worries that their degrees could lose their value as more head to university.

Mr Wong is heading a 15-member committee which is studying how to provide more degree opportunities and education pathways to Singaporeans.

By 2015, 30 per cent of each yearly cohort of students will attend university.

This is a proportion which the Government has said could increase further.

There are currently four publicly funded institutions here where students can pursue degrees: National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore Management University and Singapore Institute of Technology.

Last year, about 12,000 Singaporeans made it to these four institutions but the number of students who can pursue degrees will go up to about 14,000 in 2015.

Mr Wong was speaking to about 400 junior college and polytechnic students, university graduates and parents at Ngee Ann Polytechnic yesterday.

National University of Singapore business undergraduate Alvin Lim, 26, wondered if "academic inflation" was happening at universities overseas and cautioned that Singapore should avoid this.

"Ideally, Singapore should maintain the quality of university degrees to ensure that graduates get jobs. But I am not sure how this can be done as the places at the universities grow," said Mr Lim.

In response, Mr Wong said that in adding university places, the Government must ensure that it does not lead to a high attrition of undergraduates. Nor should it lead to any unemployment or underemployment of graduates.

He noted that Finland, one of the countries that the committee had visited, provided a reality check. Its university cohort participation rate was 65 per cent, but in the end, one in four failed to graduate with a degree.

Mr Wong told reporters after the meeting that the aspirations of young people in getting a university degree, coupled with the need to maintain quality, "reflects some of the tensions and the competing objectives we have to achieve".

"So we will continue to take this feedback in, in considering how much we can go in expanding university places," he added.

Young Singaporeans engaged Mr Wong on a variety of issues during the two-hour session yesterday.

Some asked whether it could be made easier for polytechnic graduates to enter the local universities. Others suggested that the committee look into providing degree courses in fields such as veterinary science and sports management, which are currently not offered by the local universities.

Mr Wong said the participants' views will help shape the committee's recommendations to be released by the end of the year.

ameltan@sph.com.sg

REVIEW TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

"Creativity, collaboration and communication are necessary qualities to do well in the 21st century. But I feel that these qualities are not nurtured



enough in university students. A significant portion of university coursework requires rote learning and memorisation and some of my university

professors do not teach in ways that encourage these 21st century skills. The Education Ministry should review the way university students are taught and assessed."

Nanyang Technological University biological sciences undergraduate Tay Xiong Sheng, 26

OFFER BETTER CHANCE TO ACHIEVE DREAMS

"Many young people aspire to go to university, but only 30 per cent of a cohort will be able to get a degree in Singapore. I am concerned that students will be discouraged that a significant number of them will not be able to get a degree here. And they will feel that they would not be able to achieve their dreams."

National University of Singapore business undergraduate Alvin Lim, 26

PAVE WAY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

"It is not practical for the university cohort to grow larger and larger each year. Rather, we should have the attitude of lifelong learning. Poly students



can work for a few years after graduation to gain experience and earn some money, and then go to university. University graduates

who have worked for a few years may find that they want to take on a second degree or a specialised course. They should be encouraged to do so and the employers and the universities should be supportive."

UniSIM Adjunct Professor Mano Sabnani, 60



Mr Lawrence Wong (right) with Professor Cheong Hee Kiat, president of SIM University, at yesterday's townhall meeting. PHOTO: DESMOND LUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES