

40% of each cohort to get shot at local universities

16,000 places yearly by 2020 at six institutions offering full-time courses

By **SANDRA DAVIE**
SENIOR WRITER

SINGAPORE will soon have six universities offering full-time degree programmes, giving 40 per cent of each school cohort a shot at university education right here at home by 2020.

That is up from the current cohort participation rate of 27 per cent. It translates to 16,000 undergraduate places yearly, up from this year's 13,000.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the increase at the National Day Rally last night. The additional places will be provided through the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (UniSIM) which will become Singapore's fifth and sixth universities.

He said SIT, which offers niche degree programmes in partnership with overseas universities, will increase its yearly intake beyond the projected 2,000 in 2015, and offer its own degrees.

UniSIM which offers part-time degree courses for working adults will start running full-time degree programmes but remain a private university.

The Ministry of Education will give out more details tomorrow.

Mr Lee's announcement on the increase in university places comes one year after he launched a review of the university sector to look into how more undergraduate places can be opened up for Singaporeans.

The 15-member review panel, led by Senior Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong, concluded that any new university must not be another research-intensive university like the National University of Singapore or the Nanyang Technological University.

Instead it should have a more applied, practice-oriented focus and produce a different type of graduate.

Mr Lee acknowledged the rising aspirations of Singaporeans for a university degree.

"Every parent wants his or her child to do as well as possible, go to university. And many ITE (Institute of Technical Education) students hope to go on to the poly

and most poly students aspire to get a degree," he said.

Mr Lee agreed with the review committee that it is important to produce graduates with skills which are useful and in demand. He warned against churning out graduates regardless of quality or employment opportunities.

Noting the experience of a few other countries, including Britain and the United States, and even China, where there is unemployment or underemployment of graduates, he said: "Singapore must avoid leading people up the wrong path, misleading them that if you spend three years of your life doing this, at the end you will have a happy outcome.

"We must make sure that if we encourage people to go that way, that at the end, the prospects are good."

He did not forget working adults aiming to pursue degrees.

He recognised that it took tremendous commitment to juggle work and study and said the Government will look into extending bursaries and loans to those studying part-time at UniSIM.

Junior college and polytechnic students eyeing a place in the local universities as well as their parents welcomed the announcement on more university places, which two parents described as "generous".

Previous increases in the university cohort participation rate did not go beyond 5 percentage points.

Parents like Mr R. Murugiah, 46, a shop manager, who has two sons enrolled in polytechnic, said it was a nice National Day present for parents like him.

He added: "I have been worried because there is no way I can afford to send my two sons overseas, so I am relieved that they are making more places available."

SIT's president Tan Chin Tiong said SIT will look into offering its own degrees as well as dual degrees with its foreign university partners.

UniSIM president Cheong Hee Kiat said his university, which already has a strong industry orientation, will add diversity to the higher education landscape.

sandra@sph.com.sg