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SINGAPORE NEWS

5th, 6th publicly-funded universities to pioneer system of "learning on the job"

By Monica Kotwani | Posted: 28 August 2012 11:58 hrs

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SINGAPORE: Up to half of Singapore's student cohort each year will have access to a publicly funded university place by 2020.

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (UniSIM) will offer the additional places.

With both on board, publicly funded full-time university places for Singaporeans will go up by 3,000 to 16,000 by 2020.

This will benefit 40 per cent of each cohort, up from the current 27 per cent.

Add to that, a rise in the number of Singaporeans pursuing a part-time publicly funded degree.

That's up from 7 to 10 per cent of each cohort.



Photos of

The Education Ministry (MOE) said this brings the overall publicly-funded cohort participation rate to 50 per cent by 2020.

SIT and UniSIM - Singapore's fifth and sixth university - will offer degrees that are industry-focused.

Together, they will pioneer a system of "learning on the job".

The committee tasked with reviewing the university sector said the expansion in university places was carefully calibrated.

Senior Minister of State for Education, and Information, Communications and the Arts Lawrence Wong said: "We were very mindful of the risk of expanding too rapidly, and compromising quality as a result of over expansion.

"This came across from many feedback that we had. We were aware of the risks when we looked at other countries, but we also had feedback from students themselves, who were worried that an over expansion of degree places would erode the value of the degree.

"From parents, from our international advisory panel, which cited the experiences of other countries which had expanded too rapidly, resulting in a mismatch between the degrees the students had, and the needs of the economy. Or some countries which had expanded very rapidly without adequate resourcing of the university sector, and without ensuring quality, and so you have outcomes like underemployment of university graduates, or unemployment of university graduates.

"During its year-long deliberations, the committee stuck to three guiding principles. One, that the quality and value of university education is maintained; two, that there be judicious use of public funds and; three, keeping university education affordable, while ensuring fiscal sustainability for the government."

In announcing enhancements to the university sector, Mr Wong said Singapore is trying to pioneer a distinct applied degree pathway, after extensive consultations with stakeholders, as well as looking at various models, but at the end of the day, applying in a way that fits Singapore's needs.

So, SIT will be given autonomous status and award its own degrees.

It will take in A-level, International Baccalaureate and polytechnic students and offer what's called a Cooperative Education Programme which could see undergraduates taking on prolonged work attachments.

SIT said this will be quite different from the usual internship programme as students will be paid wages like regular employees.

Professor Tan Thiam Soon, President-Designate of SIT, said: "When a student of this actually gets involved with a company, they're not just there to do an internship, just to gain some experience. They'll actually be doing some real job. So we have to work with the industry so that they actually get real wages as well, because they're doing a real job. So it's not an internship - you go in, just sit around, observe a few things and then write a report. These people will be expected to work on real projects."

UniSIM will also help to expand the university sector via the applied degree pathway.

UniSIM's full-time degree programmes will be publicly-funded and admit fresh school leavers and working adults.

Both universities said it will take some time before details on their programmes and intake numbers are finalised though SIT hopes to get autonomous status within two years.

Professor Cheong Hee Kiat, President of UniSIM, said: "It takes a little bit of time to look into this and refine; we don't want to just do it for the sake of running a programme. We really need to look at industry and businesses, and see what do they need, how can we shape our programmes that will fit the needs of business and industry. And I think it's something we're working on. And we need to work with Ministry of Education on numbers and timings and indeed we need to work with SIT because I think we have two new institutions bringing this kind of programmes. How can we coordinate so that the offerings to the public (and) the new students will be comprehensive, will be useful for industry as well as meet the aspirations of the students."

And emphasising on life-long learning, the government will also provide more funding for part-time degree courses.

It will also get the industry to provide more scholarships for those who want to upgrade after gaining work experience as well as improve access to part-time degree programmes through greater recognition of relevant work experience and alternative qualifications in the admissions criteria.

The Education Minister stressed though that the various initiatives are not about the paper chase.

Mr Heng Swee Keat said: "A degree by itself doesn't guarantee a good job. In fact, it does not even guarantee a job if you look at what's happening in Europe, in America and different parts of the world."

Better jobs, Mr Heng said, can only be created if the economy stays vibrant, and grows in breadth and depth.

- CNA/wm/ck

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