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# Economy can support more grads: Govt

## Jump in university places won't lead to unemployed grads, say leaders

By **SANDRA DAVIE**  
SENIOR WRITER

THE move to substantially raise university places will not undermine the value of a degree or lead to a glut of graduates, government leaders said yesterday.

Figures show the economy is already able to support a fairly large number of university degree holders, said Senior Minister of State

for Education Lawrence Wong.

Manpower Ministry figures indicate that close to half of Singapore residents in the 25 to 29 age group hold degrees, and 44 per cent of those in the same age group earn at least \$3,000 a month, which could be taken as a proxy for graduate-level jobs.

The demand for graduates is likely to rise further as Singapore needs a highly skilled workforce

to drive its future economy, he added.

One sign of this is how professional, managerial and executive type jobs are the fastest-growing segment of the workforce, going from 27 per cent in 2001 to 32 per cent last year.

"Going forward, clearly we can accommodate more university graduates," he said at a press conference to announce details of a plan to expand university places.

But Education Minister Heng

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Swee Keat, who was also there, said Singaporeans should not see the expansion of university places as an opportunity for a paper chase. It should be a chance for "our people to

deepen their learning, to upgrade and to seize new opportunities".

The assurance came after many expressed surprise at the generous increase in university places announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech on Sunday.

By 2020, he said, the government will add another 3,000 undergraduate places a year. This will raise the university participation rate of each cohort from the current 27 per cent to 40 per cent, or from the current 13,000 places a year to 16,000.

The increase will be achieved by expanding programmes run by the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and SIM University (Uni-SIM). They will offer more applied, practice-oriented ones.

These recommendations, submitted by a university review committee led by Mr Wong, have been accepted by the Government.

The 40 per cent figure does not include Singaporeans in part-time degree courses and those who head overseas or pursue degrees through private schools.

In fact, as Mr Wong pointed out, if students in part-time degree programmes were included, the cohort participation rate through publicly funded places will go up to 50 per cent.

While students and parents were cheered by the news, some asked if more university places would lead to underemployment or unemployment of graduates.

Some experts noted that in 1990, only 15 per cent of a cohort went to university. The new 40 per cent rate, they said, will put Singapore ahead of other Asian economies such as Hong Kong and South Korea. It will also bring it close to the level of Britain, where degree holders are finding it hard to land jobs.

Mr David Leong, managing director of human resources firm People Worldwide Consulting, said the Government must plan carefully to ensure SIT and Uni-SIM produce a different type of graduate. "Employers appreciate graduates who are job-ready and can hit the ground running."

 [sandra@sph.com.sg](mailto:sandra@sph.com.sg)

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