DIVERSE PATHS TO UNIVERSITIES

JC or Poly? An education in options is needed

TRISHA CRAIG

University degrees are many things: Markers of academic achievement, recognition of subject mastery, status symbols, signals to the labour market, luxury goods as well as credentials.

In Singapore, as elsewhere, obtaining a degree is evermore viewed as essential for attaining economic success and upward mobility.

Dhamani showed that while degree holders made up only 17 per cent of the population, they took home approximately a third of the income.

Against this backdrop, small wonder that the demand for higher education is growing.

The Government is doing an admirable job of attempting to expand the number of available university slots for its citizens, with an eye not just to numbers but to ensuring places in fields where there is market demand for graduates.

Just in the past decade, the expansion has been enormous: Compared with 2002, the intake for full-time students at university has grown by 40 per cent while at the polytechnics, the increase has been almost 50 per cent.

By 2009, the Government’s goal is to ensure that 40 per cent of the age cohort has the opportunity to attend university in Singapore.

MORE TAKING POLY ROUTE

The landscape of higher education is changing and, with it, the strategies that people will need to attain it. One of the shifts is that the polytechnics are becoming more of a route to a university degree than in the past. There are several reasons for this.

One is that while the availability of university places has risen dramatically, the growth of spots at the junior colleges (JC) and pre-university (UP) schools — the traditional gateways to university — has been much slower.

Between 2002 and 2011, first-year enrolments in these institutions grew by 27 per cent, according to data from the Ministry of Education. But this barely kept pace with population growth. According to census figures, the 15- to 19-year-old age cohort grew by about 25 per cent. Although the pre-university sector is set to grow, adding more schools in the coming years, other routes to university are needed.

A second reason is the concerted effort to create more opportunities for poly students to enter university.

To cite just one example, one of the country’s newest universities, Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), has an intake made up almost entirely of students coming from the polytechnics, who receive their bachelor’s degrees from its affiliated overseas universities. With impressive expansion plans, SIT will increase the prospects for students who hope to earn a degree.

As the path to universities becomes more diverse, it means more competition between the polytechnics and the JCs and PU’s for some of the same students. While the two pools rarely overlap in the past, now parents and students will have more choice and more decisions about what the right route is.

MAKE SCHOOLS SHARE MORE INFO

With more choice comes more uncertainty. Does it make sense for parents with university dreams for their child to send him or her to JC or a polytechnic? How do they make their choice?

Both the JCs and the polytechnics will need to provide parents and students with the kind of information they need to make an informed decision.

Not only is the landscape changing but with the increase in the percentage of students attending university, there is more diversity in the applicant pool. For families where university attendance has not been the norm, navigating the array of choices may prove to be a struggle.

Particularly critical for parents and students are outcome metrics from different schools and programmes: What percentage of JC/PU students in a given school are actually admitted to national universities, what do those numbers look like across the range of O-Level results, how many students in a given diploma programme apply to university, how many are admitted?

The answers to these kinds of questions are not always readily available.

Institutions may decline to provide them on a voluntary basis for fear that it could put them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their competitors.

Yet, making the wrong decision is potentially costly in terms of time, money and motivation.

Parents and students in this new environment must educate themselves to take best advantage of new opportunities by becoming informed consumers.

By pushing institutions for answers and data, they are not only more likely to make the best choice for themselves, they also will encourage the institutions to expand by ensuring that their performance is up to what their potential admits demand.

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