Will Aspire plan inspire change?

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IT IS a bold idea: Let those who have completed their basic studies at the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and polytechnics go out to work and further their qualifications at the same time.

The place-and-train programme is a key part of recommendations released on Monday by the Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review (Aspire) committee to boost career prospects of ITE and polytechnic graduates.

But will studying while working, instead of going on to chase the holy grail of a degree, fly with these graduates?

The first 11 place-and-train schemes start in 2016. Under the programme — modelled after Swiss and German apprenticeship schemes — participants undergo structured on-the-job training while studying to further their qualifications.

Those from the ITE can work towards diplomas, while those from polytechnics can aim for advanced and specialist diplomas.

The scheme will be supported by a framework of skills drawn up for every sector with clear progression paths these workers can take.

Yet, it comes at a time when figures on university applications, those heading for overseas study and enrolment in private schools here show that, if anything, the degree chase has intensified.

Ministry of Education (MOE) figures show that this year, the five autonomous universities, excluding SIM University, received about 37,500 applications from A-level holders and about 29,000 applications from polytechnic graduates this year.

Each student, on average, applied to two different universities. According to MOE, compared with three years ago, there were about 4,000 more university applications this year from polytechnic graduates. This is largely due to the increase in the number of students applying for the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) degree programmes, which cater to polytechnic graduates.

In the end, about 14,000 A-level and polytechnic students landed a place in the six local universities. MOE did not give the breakdown between the two groups. But previous figures released show that about 70 per cent of those from junior colleges managed to secure a place, compared with 20 per cent of the polytechnic cohort, who number about 25,000 every year.

But the remaining polytechnic diploma holders are unlikely to give up on their degree ambitions. Several thousand will head overseas, mostly to British and Australian universities which offer generous credit exemptions, allowing them to complete their degrees in one to two years.

Those who cannot afford the cost will look to private institutions in Singapore. Last published figures show that there are more than 100,000 Singaporeans enrolled in private schools.

Why is there this hankering for a degree?

Ask any diploma holder, and the answer is likely to be, “better jobs and higher salaries”. A diploma holder’s average starting salary is $2,000, while a degree holder’s is $3,000.

The gap widens further over their working life. There are no recent figures, but a 2007 study by the Ministry of Manpower showed that every extra year of schooling increases a worker’s earnings by 1.7 per cent. The rate is higher for degree holders.

Talk to job recruiters and diploma holders out in the workforce and it is a fact that even those who perform remarkably well in their jobs quickly hit a ceiling.

Still, polytechnic students are not completely closed off to the idea of Aspire’s study-while-you-work scheme.

As one second-year polytechnic student said: “Why not? You get a job, a salary and you get to further your qualifications at the same time.”

But he added a caveat. He will sign up for the programme only if it allows him to move up to graduate-level jobs and salaries. And it should not take too long. Three years is a reasonable timeframe, but five years is too long for most of them.

“Eighteen months in Australia and I come back with a degree and I can go on to a graduate-level job. Why would I want to wait five years?” said one.

For those who have only the private school route, the place-and-train scheme holds more of an attraction, as not all degrees attained through private schools here are wanted by employers. But even those students want to know if employers on the scheme will be required to promote and pay them better once they complete the programme.

Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, for his part, responded to comments that the scheme is aimed at dissuading ITE and polytechnic graduates from going for degrees, saying: “It’s not a matter of one qualification versus another, but the right and relevant qualifications and right and relevant type of learning experiences that will enable an individual to build deep skills and expertise, and enable him to excel in the workplace.”

Senior Minister of State for Education Indranee Rajah, who led the Aspire committee, noted that skilled workers are in strong demand: “The employers tell us this, OECD reports point this out and our study trips abroad confirm this.”

Indeed, students are with Aspire on the point about valuing skills — three years of hands-on, applied training in polytechnics have drummed into them the importance of this. But they point the finger at employers, noting that most pay according to the level of qualifications, not skills.

At the end of the day, Singapore’s young people are practical-minded.

Yes, a degree brings status, but what counts are higher-level jobs and good salaries. If the work-and-study scheme allows them to catch up with graduates — or even overtake them in terms of salary — then Aspire’s ideas will take wing.

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