Focus on vocational training ‘will raise standards for society’

SINGAPORE — The failure to focus on applied and technical education is the reason countries, even ones with successful economies, are grappling with the problem of underemployment, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Mr Tharman, who was speaking at a dialogue at the inaugural BASE of Pyramid World Convention and Expo at ITE College Central yesterday, said that, in countries such as China and India, there is a “very high degree of underemployment amongst people who have been trained and educated.”

“One of the biggest gaps you can see around the world ... is the gap between the type of education you get during your growing years, and the types of opportunities there are in the job market,” said Mr Tharman, who is also Finance Minister. “One of the reasons for this double weakness — the weakness in education and the weakness in being able to fulfil your potential in the workforce — is the failure to focus on applied and technical education.”

Mr Tharman, who chairs a newly- formed tripartite committee to develop an integrated system of education, training and career progression for Singaporeans, said the world has “drifted” to a very academic form of education. “This is suitable for some people, but just not suitable to discover the abilities and strengths and skills of a significant group in every population,” he said.

The focus on applied and technical education is not a matter of lowering standards, but about raising standards for the whole society. “It’s a matter of discovering skills and talent in everyone,” Mr Tharman said. “The most modern and advanced societies — you can look at Switzerland ... Germany — require large numbers of people with technical skills in services, in manufacturing and in logistics.”

Singapore, he said, had started with a “rudimentary vocational education system” and developed it over the years to become “a jewel in our system”.

“This is a pathway to success and this is something we encourage everyone to think hard about. Your best chances in life are not achieved by just drifting towards the more academic pathways, but in discovering your own talents and your own skills,” he said.

He also stressed that the job market has to reward these skills. “And that is a big challenge, working with employers, with industries, to ensure there are good careers, opportunities for progression, opportunities for you to contribute the maximum you are capable of doing,” he said.

On Monday, the Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review (ASPIRE) Committee published its recommendations, following almost nine months of work looking into improving career and academic prospects of polytechnic and ITE graduates.

Among the recommendations — which have been accepted by the Government — were better internships, more opportunities to work and study concurrently, and clearer pathways for career advancement.

Yesterday, asked by an audience member to compare Singapore’s experience in ending poverty with other countries such as South Korea, Mr Tharman said Singapore and South Korea share a “culture of aspiration”, and both nations focused on education.

“Now one bias we’ve had in Singapore, which I think is a real strength, is we have avoided converging more and more educational institutions, particularly at the tertiary level, to an academic bent,” he said.

While South Korea has a strong system, it has “a certain degree of underemployment amongst graduates”. “In Singapore, we focused early on applied education and technical education and we grew it. I think it’s a sustainable model for an advanced society.”

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