There are no plans to start another National University of Singapore or Nanyang Technological University, said Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong, who is heading a panel looking into providing more degree opportunities for Singaporeans.

He said setting up a new research-intensive university may not be the most cost-effective way to use taxpayers' money. It may be better to have an institution or pathway that offers something different from the main universities, be it more of a practical focus or simply alternative types of courses.

Mr Wong gave the example of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which he and the panel members visited on Wednesday. He made clear that he was not suggesting that Singapore polytechnics should be converted into universities. What impressed him about PolyU, as it is called, is how it has set itself apart from more established institutions.

The university, which converted from a polytechnic in 1994, aims to offer top-notch professional degrees. About 90 per cent of its courses are recognised by professional boards, and students have to spend 300 hours doing work attachments. As a result, its graduates are sought-after by employers.

Mr Wong said that the panel chose to visit Hong Kong as it has a university sector of a similar size, and like Singapore is also looking at expanding it further. "It is useful to compare notes," he said.

He called that the Hong Kong government had been "judicious and prudent" in expanding its university sector, despite facing pressure from students and parents to expand. "They have been careful for the same reasons that we share," he said, adding that he and the panel members were mindful that the expansion should not lead to an oversupply of graduates and subsequent unemployment or underemployment of degree holders.

One of the panel members, Ms Aliza Knox, managing director for commerce at Google Asia Pacific, said she was impressed with how PolyU had changed the way it is perceived by employers.

Professor Cheong Hee Kiat, president of SIM University, who also serves on the panel, said he was all for innovating and doing something different to meet the aspirations of a new generation of students.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic principal Chia Mia Chiang said whatever new pathways are set up must be feasible and that there must be demand for them.

The education panel was set up after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in August that additional degree opportunities will be provided for Singaporeans to meet an expected demand for more graduates.

The panel has looked at university models in Europe, including in France and Finland. It will submit its final report by the end of this year.