Value of varsity education will remain: Lawrence Wong

Govt to ensure quality of degrees even with more university places

By Amelia Tan

As this Government expands the university sector to provide more university places for Singaporeans, it will ensure that degrees remain prized by employers.

Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong gave this assurance yesterday. He was addressing the concerns of the university sector expressed earlier that too many degrees might lose their value as more students were taking up university places.

Mr Wong is heading a 15-member committee which is studying how to provide more degree opportunities and education pathways to Singaporeans. By 2015, 30 per cent of each yearly cohort of students will attend university.

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This is a proportion which the Government has said could increase further in the future, if it decides to discuss the expansion of the university sector to provide more university places. It will ensure that their degrees could lose their value as more heads to university.

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He noted that Finland, one of the countries that the committee had visited, provided very good degree courses in fields such as veterinary science and sports management, which are currently not offered by the local universities. Others suggested that the committee look into providing degree courses in fields such as veterinary science and sports management.

Last year, about 22,000 Singaporeans made it to these four institutions but the number of students who can pursue degrees could go up to about 30,000 in 2015. Mr Wong was speaking to about 400 university graduates and parents at Ngee Ann Polytechnic yesterday.

National University of Singapore business undergraduate Alvin Tan, 26, wondered if "academic inflation" was happening at universities overseas and questioned that Singapore should avoid this.

"Ideally, Singapore should maintain a healthy number of students to ensure that graduates get jobs, but I am not sure how this can be done as the places at the universities grow," said Mr Lim.

In response, Mr Wong said that in adding university places, the Government meant to ensure that it does not lead to a high attrition of undergraduates. Nor should it lead to any unemployment or underemployment of graduates.

He noted that Finland, one of the countries that the committee had visited, provided very good degree courses in fields such as veterinary science and sports management.

"Many young people aspire to go to university, but only 15 per cent of a cohort will be able to get a degree in Singapore. I am concerned that students will be discouraged that a significant number of them will not be able to get a degree here. And they will feel that they would not be able to achieve their dreams," said Mr Wong.

Young Singaporeans engaged Mr Wong on a variety of issues during the two-hour session yesterday. Some asked whether it could be made easier for polytechnic graduates to enter university. Mr Wong said that the committee will take this feedback on board.

"So we will continue to take this feedback on board, as considering how much we can do in expanding university places," he added.

Nanyang Technological University biological science undergraduate Tay Xiong Sheng, 26, said it was easier for polytechnic graduates to enter university, but only 30 per cent of a cohort will be able to get a degree in Singapore. He was heading a 15-member committee which is studying how to provide more degree opportunities and education pathways to Singaporeans.

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OFFER BETTER CHANCE TO ACHIEVE DREAMS

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LIFELONG LEARNING

"It is not practical for the university cohort to grow larger each year. Rather, we should have the attitude of lifelong learning. Poly students can work for a few years after graduation to gain experience and earn some money, and then go to university. University graduates who have worked for a few years may find that they want to take on a second degree or a specialised course. They should be encouraged to do so and the employers and the universities should be supportive," said Mr Wong.

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