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Compared to their parents who had only one if not two local universities to choose from, teenagers heading to university this year can choose among six institutions and several courses by April 1. The Straits Times **Senior Education Correspondent Sandra Davie** looks at how the university education landscape has evolved. Undergraduates, meanwhile, give their take on why they chose the school they are in now. A-LEVEL school leavers and polytechnic graduates applying for a university place this year are faced with the difficult but happy problem of having to choose from a range of higher education options.

As recently as 14 years ago, there were only National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Singapore's third university, the Singapore Management University (SMU), began taking in students in 2000.

Faced with the challenge of establishing its own identity from the start, SMU chose to differentiate itself from NUS and NTU. It introduced American-style admission, curriculum and teaching in Singapore.

Four years later, employers receiving its first graduates noted an "SMU difference" - they were more polished and well-spoken.

With SMU posing a challenge, NUS and NTU dons were also forced to think about how they could differentiate themselves.

NUS used its high worldwide ranking to its advantage and formed university alliances to offer its students exposure overseas. As it ramped up its research, it also built overseas colleges to nurture entrepreneurs.

Three years ago, NUS opened parts of its University Town at the former Warren Golf Club site in Clementi to give students a residential college experience. The Yale-NUS liberal arts college commenced classes last year.

NTU's direction was initially less clear as it moved to offer programmes in the social sciences, digital media and fine arts. But more recently, NTU has sharpened its science and technology focus.

As the world's largest single-campus engineering facility, turning out about 2,500 graduates a year, NTU has also innovated in engineering education.

The Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), the Singapore Institute of Technology and SIM University all started with a differentiated model.

SUTD's unique selling point was its partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States and China's Zhejiang University, combining the best of East and West. Another innovative feature is its curriculum, which marries engineering, architecture and design training.

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More recently, the Government announced the expansion of the Singapore Institute of Technology and SIM University. Their offerings too will be different in that the focus will be on applied hands-on learning. Work internships will be a big part of their curriculum to prepare students well for the job market.

It makes sense to encourage differentiation and diversity in the higher education sector as it focuses public resources on what institutions do best.

No doubt this has led to some friendly competition and rivalry, but instead of competing head-on in the same area, it has spurred universities to build on their unique strengths and aim for different peaks.