

Casting wider net for varsity students

In the first of a four-part series on the future of education, Mr Ong Ye Kung talks about harnessing the aspirations of Singaporeans.

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First, the good news.

For those eyeing a place in one of Singapore's six public universities this year, there are 15,500 spots on offer, 500 more than last year – with the majority of the additional places coming from SIM University and the Singapore Institute of Technology which is launching new allied health courses.

Now, the even better news.

Universities are deepening the pool of applicants for several courses, including hard-to-get-into medicine and law. For every one place, two or three are being shortlisted.

Academics will not be the only yardstick; applicants' interests and aptitude for the course will also play a crucial part in whether they make the final cut.

"Casting this wider net" will mean universities spending more resources and time, but Acting Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung insists this is the way forward to realise the vision of the SkillsFuture movement, which, in a broad sense, aims to provide Singaporeans with the opportunities to develop to their fullest potential throughout life.

"We tell Singaporeans that SkillsFuture is for everybody," he told The Straits Times in a wide-ranging interview on the changing nature of higher education, jobs and the economy. "It starts with you... your interests and your aspirations. And if we don't even take that into account in admissions, then where do we start?"

Aptitude-based admission is big on Mr Ong's agenda, and worth the effort and time because it works, he said. He points to a study by his ministry comparing polytechnic students admitted because of their aptitude and those who got in because of grades. The first group performed much better – with more than double the number graduating with a Grade Point Average of 3.5 and above – when compared to other students.

What is more, the study found that they were more likely to go on to pursue a career in their field of study or a related one.

This confirms what may have been intuitive to us all along, said Mr Ong, who oversees higher education and skills. "When you are able to choose and enter a course you are interested in or feel passionate about, you... will likely do better."

He also stressed that aptitude-based admission is different from discretionary admission, in which a student's non-academic achievements, in areas such as sports and community work, are taken into ac-



Mr Ong admits that "casting a wider net" in admissions requires more resources and time, but he stresses that it has to be done to realise the vision of the SkillsFuture movement – to harness the collective interests and aspirations of Singaporeans. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

count. "Discretionary admission is fundamentally still based on academic grades. You didn't meet the grades, so I exercise discretion to let you in, based on your co-curricular activity, or volunteer work.

"Aptitude-based admission is different. I look at you holistically as a person, taking into account your grades but, more importantly, your interests, your experiences, your strengths and weaknesses, and admit you on that basis."

He is only too aware of the usual complaints over aptitude-based admission – on it being a subjective and opaque process. Yes, a judgment call has to be made, he said, but people will be surprised at the amount of thought and work that go into assessing students. He knows because during admissions season, he receives many appeal letters. He sends them on to universities and they reply with detailed notes.

"I am very impressed. They receive tens of thousands of applications. Yet each case is carefully assessed, reasons documented and, overall, yes or no."

He understands why more and more here are aspiring for a degree. It is only natural as there is a premium in the market for degree holders. But there is a danger, he warns.

"If too many people go for a degree, then it is no longer scarce, the premium disappears, the whole purpose of having a degree gets eroded, and we may find ourselves having difficult underemployment issues," he said, highlighting the case of countries like South Korea where the unemployment rate for new graduates is as high as 30 per cent.

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MR ONG YE KUNG, Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills)

Can this happen in Singapore as the Government increases the cohort participation rate to give 40 per cent of an age group places in the local universities by 2020? Add to that another 10 per cent of Singaporeans who are expected to take up degrees on a part-time basis with institutions here.

"It depends on the type of economy we have," he said with quiet confidence. "If we engage in high-value-added activities in highly productive sectors, our need for graduates and well-educated, well-trained talent will be high.

"We have been moving in that direction, which is why we could move from a cohort participation rate of 30 per cent to 50 per cent by 2020.

"Our carrying capacity and our need for graduates are increasing. Graduates are needed not just to take up jobs of managers, supervisors and professionals. It's also in many crafts and trades, where we need people with deep skills who can operate at a very high level of competency."

He returns to the topic of SkillsFuture and the role it will play in nation- and people-building – including encouraging a high command of skills and developing a meritocratic system that is inclusive and celebrates a diversity of talents.

"But most important of it all, SkillsFuture has to be a personal enterprise undertaken by each and every Singaporean to discover his strengths and talents, pursue his dreams and achieve mastery."

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'If I were 18 again...'

Mr Ong Ye Kung studied in Maris Stella High and Raffles Junior College before heading to the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) on a Public Service Commission scholarship. He is married with two teenage children. Here he talks about the further education choices he made when he was 18.

Q Why LSE and why economics?

A I very much wanted an overseas education. I liked maths, and also enjoyed economics, particularly macro economics because it explains why the world is as such. At LSE there was a course in Econometrics and Mathematical Economics, so that looked like an ideal combination. The skills I picked up are actually rather relevant to big data analysis now.

Q If you were 16 or 18 now, what would you choose – junior college or polytechnic? Would you go to university straight after that or work first? Which degree would you pursue?


A It is hard to say. It will depend on my interest. I may well prefer something more hands on, and may pick the polytechnic route which many top students do today. If I can, I would still want to attend university – to get the "currency" to have access to good jobs. I will do something interdisciplinary, maybe IT and business, or engineering and business. If I go to a polytechnic, I may choose to work first before getting a degree. I will get to learn about workplace and industry, and will be more mature and clearer on my interest by the time I embark on a university education.

Q What if your daughters decide to take the polytechnic route? Or decide not to further their education?

A It is really up to them. I just want them to be happy and be who they would like to be. If that means going to an applied institution to learn something hands on, good for them.

If they drop out of school, I'd be upset like all parents if I think they have not tried their best, didn't muster up the discipline to take school seriously. But if they drop out because they cannot cope with the academic demands or because they have another burning passion, then I will support them on the road less travelled.

The dreams of parents can be a heavy burden for children. My father didn't want me to study too much. He believed it was better for me to learn by working. Luckily, I didn't have to counter that. My mother, the teacher, countered him. They sorted it out among themselves and I went to university.



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