

# What having a university education really means



Andrea Ong

Is a degree no longer that important?

That issue has been the subject of some debate recently, after four ministers spoke in quick succession on how a degree is not the only path to success for young Singaporeans.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who started the ball rolling in a recent speech to polytechnic students, spoke of the many good options available to poly graduates besides a degree, such as working for a few years or starting their own business.

It is good advice. But some are also wondering if the Government is sending mixed signals after its announcement last year that it is increasing university places – by 2020, 40 per cent of each cohort will go to university, up from 27 per cent now.

Could it be that young Singaporeans' aspirations are outstripping the reality and demands of the job market here?

As it is, the United States and some European countries are already grappling with the issue of high graduate unemployment and under-employment.

It is an issue that needs some unpacking. First of all, why do Singaporeans aspire to go to university?

Among the myriad reasons people may have, there are two which are particularly relevant to this discussion.

The first is the fear among those – including poly and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates – who think they may lose out in terms of pay and job opportunities if

they do not get a degree.

Two, societal expectations that say you are less than top tier if you do not have a degree.

For the first concern, perhaps more studies need to be done to match anecdotal evidence with what is really happening in the job market.

But on the whole, perhaps there needs to be a shift in how we think of a university education.

Are employers ready to open more avenues to non-graduates and accept factors like work experience or character in lieu of a degree?

If employers can be more understanding in this respect, it might help reassure poly and ITE graduates who wish to start working right away.

And while "broadening the definition of success" is becoming something of a cliché these days, that is precisely what needs to happen here too.

Can students – regardless of whether they are from junior college, polytechnic or ITE – aspire towards careers that may not necessarily need degrees without being judged?

If university education can be diversified and other routes to success opened up, what remains of the value of a degree?

In an illuminating interview last week, Singapore Management University president Armand De Meyer provided an answer.

University education is more than the scroll, he said. It is about the irreplaceable experiences of the excitement of learning, the discussions with others, the creativity of working day and night on projects and making new friends.

"I hope we can go a little bit more towards an attitude of, 'I had an interesting experience and that itself is much more important than the fact that at the end of my X weeks of learning I get a piece of paper that says, You Did It!'"

Perhaps it is time to think of university in terms of the experience, rather than as a paper guaranteeing success in life.

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