

ST-SMU Reimagining Universities

Planning for uni places needs rethink

In this first of a four-part series, senior education correspondent **Sandra Davie** talks to Education Minister **Ong Ye Kung** on whether it makes sense to use hard numbers to plan for university places

This year, the Singapore Government will deliver on the 40 per cent cohort participation rate (CPR) for university that it had pledged in 2012. That means four out of 10 in an age group will go on to study for a degree in one of the six local universities.

What happens from next year? Will the number be capped at the 40 per cent, although many more Singaporeans now aspire to go to university and see a degree as a minimum for employment?

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung in an interview with The Straits Times said that as announced in 2012, the university participation rate will effectively rise to 50 per cent. The additional places, though, are for mature learners – working adults who want to pursue higher qualifications.

And they need not take the traditional four-year degree route. They can pursue a degree through part-time studies or through the SkillsFuture Work-Study degree path.

But going forward, Mr Ong said it may not make sense any more to plan in terms of CPR.

“Our future focus must be about on how you progress, what are the pathways that will enable people to go as far as they can while staying relevant to industries.

“And if you proceed to reach a certain stage where you aspire to have a degree, or something on a par with it, then so be it. There will be different pathways for you to attain it.”

He stressed that Singaporeans will have to move away from the idea of “frontloading” education, that is, completing all their study before going out to work.

Work trends will demand that education be lifelong and interspersed with work.

“He went on to elaborate on how the higher education landscape will have to transform.

Q Do you think the higher education landscape will have to evolve to stay relevant?

A A few of the traditional divides would have to be breached. One is between study and work. You have to now intersperse study with work.

Another is between technical and soft skills. We used to frontload a lot of technical knowledge, a lot of content. Today, we talk about the importance of developing soft skills. Which may mean that the person may not graduate with deep technical knowledge, but would have had more exposure to nurture and acquire soft skills.

But he can always go back to deepen his technical skills later.

Another area where the lines have become blurred is academic learning and learning at work.

There was a time, post-World War II, when scientific breakthroughs came from universities and from government, especially the military. But today, they are also coming from the industry.

So knowledge and learning are no longer the monopoly of universities, and learning at work can be just as valuable. I think we are seeing things blending.

We have to look at the bigger picture – things are changing so fast and the world is so big and you need to learn the technical skills, plus the critical soft skills, plus have intercultural exposure to thrive in today’s world.

So, to keep on adapting and advancing, you have to embrace lifelong learning. The old assumptions for many professions, that you must achieve a certain stock of knowledge and skills to see through your career, will have to change. This means that you don’t have to frontload education too much.

Q How can the Ministry of Education (MOE) encourage students to engage in lifelong learning and not necessarily “frontload” all their education, before they go out to work?

A Universities need to evolve. Our universities now allow students to take gap years to pursue other interests, such as establishing start-ups. They are also making it easier for people to take up courses while working.

The National University of Singapore – for example, treats every student enrolment as lasting for 20 years, not just three or four years. This helps students build their careers and upskill at the same time. The Singapore Management University Academy offers stackable modules leading to the award of graduate certificates, graduate diplomas and master’s degrees.

Q When the Government announced raising the CPR to 40 per cent, there was some worry that it may lead to graduate unemployment. But job prospects have been good for graduates. Can you comment on the expansion of university places in the past eight years?

A The CPR has gone up from 27 per cent in 2012 and will reach 40 per

cent this year.

We have opened up different pathways, such as applied degree pathways mainly through the Singapore Institute of Technology and Singapore University of Social Sciences.

In some areas like early childhood education and nursing, we opened up a degree pathway to allow the professions to achieve a higher level of proficiency. In a way, they were low-hanging fruit that helped raise the CPR.

The graduate unemployment rate is low as most of the education they receive remains relevant to industries.

But from here on, we have to recognise the value in different pathways, and I think social mindsets, rather than policy, should lead the change.

Q Employers are still largely hiring based on qualifications. How can we change that, and should the Government lead the way?

A Look at polytechnic grads. When they step into the workforce, starting pay congregates around \$2,400 to \$2,600. But the polys account for over half of every cohort. It cannot be that polys produce graduates who command pretty much the same salary. Among university grads, IT grads, for example, can command much more. So there’s more of a gradient.

So I do wish to see change – for hiring practices to be more competency-based.

In the past, because fewer people went to university, being selected for admission signals that you survived the sorting system. It must mean that you are good and I will just hire you.

But that was when only 20 per cent of students went to university. But now that it is 50 per cent, employers must move towards a competency-based model – hiring that person because they can do the job.

There is always this view that if the public sector shouldn’t do it, then the private sector shouldn’t be doing this. I think this is an excuse.

Everyone can make the change. Besides, the public sector is not monolithic. I’ve seen agencies that have made bold moves.

Take the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore, for example, for air traffic controllers.

Whether you are a poly grad or university grad, you are placed on the same grade and receive the same salary once assessed and found to have the skills required for the job.

I hope MOE can make changes in how we hire poly grads too. There are different types of jobs, and some jobs ought to command a premium depending on how rare and valued those skills are.

Q Do you think alternative models of higher education, such as coding schools, will take root here?

A My own sense is that like all industries, education is also being disrupted. You get disrupted when you cease to adapt and change.

And I think we are already seeing this happen in other countries, where industries frustrated with their universities put in their own money to support alternative pathways that will produce the people they need.

The Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology, Minerva, 42, and Holberton – the coding schools



Graduates at a Singapore Management University commencement ceremony in 2017. Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said that as announced in 2012, the university participation rate will effectively rise to 50 per cent. But he also stressed the importance of lifelong learning and highlighted the availability of different pathways. ST FILE PHOTO

– are all manifestations of that trend. If we offer these alternatives, I would much prefer to do so through the institutions we have.

Q You have pushed for aptitude-based admissions in the polys, Institute of Technical Education and universities. Some question if we are moving away from a meritocratic system. What do you say to that?

A If we have 50 per cent of every cohort going to university, then we must go by competencies, which means that we must move to a more holistic assessment.

Quite a bit of thought went into aptitude-based admissions, even the name. An earlier proposal was to call it holistic admissions, but we didn’t want to give the impression of affirmative action. We wanted something that is purer, that also reflects our intention.

Aptitude-based admissions take into account students’ passions, interests and strengths as well.

Academic grades can be an indication of aptitude as well, so we take that into account, where relevant.

The students admitted through aptitude-based admissions are doing well. So there is something to be said – that if you are interested in something, you will do better.

Q Is there a rethinking of the one bite of the cherry policy, where you can have only one shot at a subsidised degree education? Will MOE consider giving more bites of the cherry?

A We are prepared to give Singaporeans bites of different healthy fruits. Meaning you can go back to any education institution or CET Centre for a grad diploma or grad cert to upgrade your knowledge and upskill yourself.

As I said, I doubt the future is just about getting degrees. Instead, we should look at the skills individuals would need for their job and support them to upgrade themselves.

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About Ong Ye Kung

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, 50, was elected Member of Parliament for Sembawang GRC in September 2015, and appointed to the Cabinet of Singapore on Oct 1, 2015.

He is concurrently a board member of the Monetary Authority of Singapore and chairman of the Chinese Development Assistance Council. Prior to his Cabinet appointment, he held the position of director of group strategy at Keppel Corporation, overseeing long-term strategic planning of the group’s activities.

Before that, he was deputy secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress, overseeing the labour movement’s employment and employability programmes.

He also held various positions in the Government earlier, including as chief executive of the Singapore Workforce Development Agency, during which he spearheaded many initiatives to build up the continuing education and training infrastructure. From 1997 to 2003, he was press secretary to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and principal private secretary from 2003 to 2005.

Mr Ong was also the deputy chief negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement signed in 2003.

He is a graduate of the London School of Economics and Political Science with a Bachelor of Science (Economics) First Class Honours degree, and holds a Master of Business Administration from the Institute of Management Development, Lausanne, Switzerland.

He is married with two teenage children.

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