

Education landscape sees gradual shift in 2013

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SINGAPORE: From having more niche programmes to more courses in universities, the secondary and post-secondary education landscape is seeing a gradual shift, to one that can accommodate multiple pathways.

More employers are looking for work-readiness in fresh graduates.

Two universities in Singapore believe they have an answer - by blending work and study into an applied degree programme, which will start in 2014.

Their approaches cover two extremes.

SIM University is bringing a broad-based education in business and accountancy to the table, while the Singapore Institute of Technology is offering highly-specialised engineering programmes in rail and software.

Business and engineering are already flagship courses in Singapore's other national universities.

But observers said there may not necessarily be a risk of an oversupply of business and engineering graduates.

There will be some students who do not end up working in the industry they were trained for. Also, business and engineering remain popular choices even among Singaporeans who pursue their degrees overseas.

Lim Biow Chuan, the chair of Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, said: "As we create more places for our local students, I suppose the hope is that more of our students will not think about going overseas unless they have no choice, but that they will enrol in the local universities. That helps us to manage the figures a little bit better."

The goal is to allow 40 per cent of each cohort to attain a university education by 2020. That figure does not include Singaporeans who study in foreign universities.

The question is also whether Singapore will have enough jobs to support the increase in university graduates.

Zaqy Mohamad, member of Government Parliamentary Committee for Manpower, said: "I think for as long as the economy is growing, the economy is vibrant, I think we can see jobs. But it's also not about job growth. It's also about fulfilling aspirations of Singaporeans as well because many may have graduated with diplomas or have ITE certificates. And today, the opportunity arises because we have been committed to this philosophy of many alternative ways of success."

"But having said that, (after) having given someone the chance at having a degree, it's up to him or her to perform. Not all graduates are the same. So I think once you're out in the job market, it's down to job performance."

Mr Lim said it is also about transforming jobs to add value.

He cited the banking industry as an example: "Nowadays, they have transformed the banking industry where the person at the counter is a relationship manager. So they have enlarged the job scope. If we can transform different industries to allow graduates to say, 'I don't mind taking on this job even though it's quite similar to what other people have been doing', then I think we would be able to meet the aspirations and expectations of the graduates. But it would mean having to enlarge the job scope as well as the area of responsibility for such graduates who come into the economy."

Another area with urgent manpower needs is community law.

For about 50 years, Singapore had only one law school. The second law school opened at Singapore Management University in 2007.

But soon, it will welcome its third at UniSIM.

With its applied programme and focus on family and criminal law, the law school is hoping to appeal to mature students, including former policemen and social workers with related experience.

But this has left some wondering if this new batch of law graduates would be regarded as "second class" to the young lawyers from National University of Singapore and Singapore Management University, many of whom are gunning for corporate law practice.

Mr Lim, a practising lawyer himself, said that is a temporary problem of perception that is unlikely to hurt their employment prospects.

He said: "The legal profession has got many types of law firms, there would be law firms that also specialise in family law, in criminal practice, and these are law firms that have traditionally said that it's very difficult for them to find junior lawyers to help them. Because most of the junior lawyers that come out from NUS and SMU - they're all attracted to work in the large law firms, doing corporate practice.

"I'm sure it's a huge market, from the law firms which are practising community, family and criminal law, who're looking out for graduates who are trained in this particular area. I don't think it's an issue that we're concerned about the university graduates from any university being seen as second-rate or third-rate. I think ultimately, if you are a competent practitioner, you are able to advise people properly, I think that is the most important, more than just perception of how good your university is."

As for secondary education, Singapore's top schools were reminded - more than once - not to become closed circles.

Mr Lim said: "What we are seeing is that the students who are going to some of the more brand-name schools, they're all coming from a certain background. And so they will mix with people from a certain background. And the fear is that they will start thinking that because they come from better backgrounds, they are entitled to go into this school."

The Education Ministry is therefore taking steps to tear down any walls that may reinforce elitism.

It has also expanded financial help for students who are keen to enter top independent schools but are put off for fear they cannot afford it or fit in.

Secondary schools have also received S\$100,000 each to develop niche programmes of their own.

The goal is to create distinctive schools that will draw students based on their personal interests and competencies, rather than the academic standing of a school.

This could also perhaps to allow students of different backgrounds to mix.

The last mile is to convince parents education is not simply a rat race.

Mr Lim said: "For every new policy, I think we need to give it time to work, we need parents to be able to see for themselves how effective the change in policy is. So I don't expect parents to immediately say yes just because the minister says yes. They would also look around. They would see what they feel is best for their child in terms of their own child's development."

To further drive home the point that exams and grades are not the most important outcome, even physical education will get an overhaul.

The frequency of the physical test NAPFA (National Physical Fitness Award) will be reduced to once every two years in favour of games and sports.

- CNA/xq