Fellow varsities say 4th unit will add diversity

A new university need not start off with every faculty in place, Tharman says

By NANDE KHIN and OH BOON PING

[SINGAPORE] Local universities said yesterday they do not feel threatened by a fourth publicly-funded university here, part of which could be up and running in less than four years.

Instead they welcomed another university, saying it will add to the diversity of the tertiary education landscape.

A spokesman for the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) said a fourth university will help achieve the prime minister’s goal of helping more people obtain tertiary education.

"As a fast-growing advanced economy, Singapore needs more graduates to support its growth," said an NTU spokesman. "Currently in Singapore, about 23 per cent of each cohort make it to university, whereas in some European countries, 45 per cent of the cohort make it to university."

"We don’t see a new university as a potential rival. On the contrary, we think universities can complement one another in Singapore’s education landscape."

Tan Chin Tiong, deputy president and provost of the Singapore Management University (SMU) agrees. "Every year there is an increasing number of qualified students, including polytechnic graduates, who are desiring of a university education but may not afford or wish for an overseas education," he said.

"A fourth university will increase their options to further their studies here. In addition, one or more new universities will add diversity to the local tertiary education landscape. This will be good for Singapore."

The proposed fourth university was announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech on Sunday, with more details to be released in a year’s time.

Yesterday, Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam indicated that the new university could be set up quickly.

"If you take as an example SMU - not a large university - it took about three years from the time of conception and announcement to the first intake of students," he said. "So that’s a rough benchmark. But it does not mean that we have to wait three years before things start happening. I think some things can start happening earlier."

A new university need not start off with every faculty in place, offering a whole range of degrees, he said. Instead, parts of the university can start off, offering degrees in niche areas and growing from there.

The time frame will depend on the model of the university which a committee, chaired by Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew, will look into, Mr Tharman said.

The committee will submit its recommendations by next August. It will also study the feasibility and possible models of another tertiary institution - a small liberal arts college.

This college may be either publicly or privately-run, Mr Tharman said. The committee will study liberal arts colleges in the US as models.

A third area the committee will look at is how degrees in specialised areas can be offered by building on the existing framework with which polytechnics here tie up with universities to offer niche degree programmes.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive, Mr Tharman said. A combination of models may be considered as part of the expansion of the university sector.

Mr Lee said in his National Day Rally speech that by 2015 the government will increase the number of publicly-funded university places to cater to 30 per cent of each cohort of Singaporeans.

He also said the government will offer incentives to encourage more non-Malays to study Malay and for non-Chinese to study Chinese as a third language in secondary school and beyond.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) announced yesterday that from next year, students who pass the Malay (Special Programme) and Chinese (Special Programme) will be awarded two bonus points for admission to junior college.

In addition, they will be able to count their grades in these programmes in lieu of a humanities subject within the aggregate score for junior college admission. The programme will also be extended to pre-university level.

MOE also said the first schools to offer a new Regional Studies Programme will be Raffles Girls’ School (Secondary), Raffles Institution, Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) and Victoria School.

There will be 120 students in each cohort for the programme across the four schools. Up to 100 two-year scholarships for the programme will be awarded each year.