SINGAPORE: Singapore could have more than four universities to cater to the education aspirations of the youth, said the Education Ministry, in a follow-up session to the National Day Rally.

In order to allow 30 percent of each cohort to access a subsidised university education by 2015, the government is thinking of three approaches.

The first approach is to let polytechnics tie up with local or foreign universities to offer degree programmes in specialised areas.

Some polytechnics are, in fact, already doing that.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic, for example, has tied up with Boston-based Wheelock College to offer the Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Educational Studies and Leadership.

The second possibility is the setting up of a new comprehensive university.

Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said: "One model that we take quite seriously is the model that you see in several European countries – in Switzerland, in Denmark, in Sweden, where there are technical universities of a very high order of excellence. (They offer) degree and masters level education but (are also) technically oriented and practice-based – for example, the Technical University of Denmark and the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm."

The third option is to set up a small, top quality liberal arts college offering a broad-based curriculum with a low teacher-to-student ratio.

This idea was supported by the International Academic Advisory Panel, which had initially suggested that it be privately run with public support.

Mr Tharman said the proposals are not mutually exclusive and all three ideas can come to fruition.

"If you take, as an example, the SMU (Singapore Management University), it took about three years from time of conception and announcement to the first intake of students.

"A new university may not start off all at one shot with every faculty providing a whole span of degrees. It may start off in certain niche areas and grow from there. The SMU experience is a rough guide but it doesn’t mean we have to wait three years before things start happening. I think some things can start happening earlier,” said Mr Tharman.

This year, 28,000 local students applied for a place in the universities in Singapore and only half of these students got in.

Much of the demand comes from polytechnic students.

Mr Tharman said: "Currently there is some inefficiency in the system where a large number of polytechnic graduates, having obtained a specialised applied diploma, go on to a traditional university degree somewhere in the world that’s not really building directly on what they have learnt in the polytechnic years.

"So one option we will study is whether a new university can offer a more articulate degree, more stream-lined, more rationalised, so that the polytechnic education can be built upon."

Professor Tan Chin Tong, deputy president and provost of SMU, said "Every year, there is an increasing number of qualified students, including polytechnic graduates, who are deserving of a university education, but may not afford or wish to go overseas.

"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."

Many have suggested that another way of expanding university places faster is to expand the current three universities by building new campuses in different parts of Singapore.

But Mr Tharman said: “Expanding and building on our three universities is no longer feasible. If you look at the United States, some state universities have several campuses, but I think NUS (National University of Singapore) and NTU (Nanyang Technological University) are already quite large, close to 25,000 students each.

"We are better off creating diversity, having different teams of people at the council level, senior management level and at the faculty, and different approaches to education."

The committee that has been set up to look into this issue will be conducting study trips to US and Europe in the months ahead.

They will also be meeting with people from the industry, academia, parents and students.

Recommendations from the committee are expected by August next year.

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