Education panel to look into upping graduate numbers

It will assess if S'pore needs more, and how to encourage more to take up masters, PhDs

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A HIGH-LEVEL panel of education experts and industry leaders from around the world will spend this week looking at whether Singapore should produce more graduates.

Today, four in 10 children who enter Primary 1 each year make it to university. But the target should perhaps be one in two, to match the needs of a changing economy which will demand more well-educated workers in future.

The 12 members of the International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP) will also look at post-graduate education and what should be done to encourage more students to take up masters and PhD courses.

A larger number of such specialists will be crucial if Singapore is to succeed in its ambition of becoming a research and development centre.

Last year, the Government announced that $13 billion would be used over the next five years – double the sum spent between 2001 and 2005 – to hone the country’s R&D capabilities.

However, only 10 per cent of students currently pursuing PhDs at NUS and Nanyang Technological University are Singaporeans. The IAAP meets every two years to advise the Government on the direction tertiary education here should take.

It was set up in 1997 by the Education Ministry to advise Singapore universities on major trends and directions in university education and research so as to help them develop into world-class institutions.

Speaking at the opening of the panel’s sixth meeting yesterday, former deputy prime minister and panel chairman Tony Tan said it would have to consider whether more breadth, meaning more graduates, and depth – graduates with more than just a basic degree – are needed.

He cited the Swedish government’s target of 50 per cent of those born in any given year to start university education by the age of 25.

The figure is around 50 per cent for a knowledge-based economy like Japan, too.

In Singapore currently, 23 per cent, or 11,000 students, of every Primary 1 cohort go on to get a degree from a local university, while an estimated 17 per cent or so get one from overseas or via private schools here.

The panel, which is expected to submit its recommendations on Friday, had in previous meetings focused on bettering the three main local universities.

But it will widen its focus this year to see how the tertiary sector – including polytechnics – as a whole can help research and development activities here grow.

Singapore Management University assistant economics professor Yip Chun Seng told The Straits Times that, as an economy grows and adopts new technologies, it relies on universities to provide skilled labour.

National University of Singapore president Shih Choon Fong said that there was a pressing need to encourage more Singaporeans to work for post-graduate degrees as the country transforms itself into a knowledge-based economy.

While academics and economists The Straits Times spoke to said a 50 per cent graduate rate was achievable, Prof Shih stressed: “We also need a critical mass of people with masters and PhDs to succeed in becoming a research- and innovation-driven economy.”

He added that more places for students would have to be provided.

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