What 4th university could be

1 Tech university
2 Liberal arts college
3 Specialised-degree institution

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COMING: More university places and more universities to choose from.

A government panel set up to bring this about will study different university models - the technical universities of Europe, the American liberal arts colleges and foreign specialised institutions - and then recommend, in a year, one or more models for Singapore's fourth or even fifth university.

An additional 2,400 places will be created every year by 2015 in areas that will meet Singapore's manpower needs and students' aspirations.

These details came from the Education Ministry following Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's announcement on Sunday to make university places available to 30 per cent of each school cohort by 2015.

He noted at the National Day Rally that more students are doing well in school and eyeing a university education. Such dreams are thwarted - as happened this year, when some failed to get in despite more places having been opened up - complaints about admission policies will fester.

Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam noted at a press conference yesterday that in 1990, 15 per cent of each school cohort made it to university. This went up to 20 per cent in 2000 and will be raised to 25 per cent in 2010. The rate is now 23.5 per cent.

Describing this rise as a "sensible pace", he said it has enabled Singapore to avoid the pitfalls of expanding the university sector too quickly, as has happened in some countries.

Elsewhere, institutions have had to handle high drop-out rates and graduates who find it tough to find jobs.

Cautioning against oversupply, Mr Tharman said the committee, to be headed by Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew, should take a leaf from the Singapore Management University - the smallest one here which has quickly grown a name by offering quality education relevant to the marketplace.

Mr Tharman said: "At the end of the day, it should not be about merely expanding university places, but about choice, quality, differentiation and serving the market in a new way."

Rear-Admiral (NS) Lui, who was also at the press conference, agreed. He said his committee will study the interests and aspirations of two groups of youngsters who have headed for overseas universities and private schools here after failing to land a place in the local universities.

They are a sizeable number of polytechnic graduates and a small crop of A-level students.

Of the different university models available, Mr Tharman said they were all highly regarded, even though their approach differed from that of traditional universities.

The technical universities the committee will study include the Technical University of Denmark and the Netherlands' Eindhoven University of Technology.

The liberal arts colleges are small private institutions offering a broad education in the humanities. Williams and Amherst in Massachusetts are examples.

Among colleges with specialised degree programmes, Wheelock College in Boston, known for early childhood education, is an example.

The news of a fourth or even fifth university here brought relief to parents such as administration manager Alex Ong, 42, who has two sons likely to pick the polytechnic route.

"Looking at university admissions this year, I have been worried about what will happen to my two sons when they are ready to go to university. "It's good that the Government is doing something about it," he said.

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