It’s also about greater choice

The question isn’t whether Singapore should have a new university. Clearly, there is a demand for more places from school leavers and polytechnic graduates. With already 23,000 undergraduates at the National University of Singapore and 19,000 at the Nanyang Technological University in the last academic year, expanding them beyond existing plans won’t do. And though the Singapore Management University still has a modest student body, it was always meant to be a more intimate college anyway. So if places are to be made available to 30 per cent of each school cohort by 2015, and if young people are not to have their dreams frustrated or be forced overseas for college, a new university almost makes an argument for itself. The more pertinent question is what kind of university. And here lies an opportunity: to provide a range of choice for students.

When a government panel begins its study of options, we would second the recommendation of Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam that it considers the SMU case. Unlike NUS and NTU, SMU feels more like an American college. Moreover, there is its size again – small – and the unique character of its urban campus. SMU also decided to select students not only on the strength of their exam results, but, for example, by interviewing all short-listed candidates as well. To judge by its graduates’ employment record, the less conventional approach (at least for Singapore) worked out very well. There’s more than one way to pick students.

Of course, no one is suggesting that the next university should be just like SMU. Only that SMU broke the mould, so planners should now not be limited in what they think a university should look and feel like, or how it operates, teaches and admits students. Already, thinking has begun on what kind of university the next one should be: a liberal arts college, a technical university or a specialised institution? But that is a limiting constraint. Perhaps the debate should focus instead on what Singapore needs to round out the educational choices for its students. Considered this way, yes, it is possible that perhaps two new universities will be needed, though their size must conform to realistic demand.

Young people are not all alike. Some will enjoy the mega size of NUS and NTU, finding opportunities to blossom academically within a large community. For others, those opportunities are best exploited in closer settings. And yet others may want to deepen their general education as an undergraduate before specialising – if at all. Providing a wider choice for students will help them grow comfortable more quickly, and discover their potential earlier.