Let more parties have a say in shaping our fourth Uni

By Shashank Nigam

If given a chance, would you be willing to play a role in the future of our nation?
Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had sounded the possibility of Singapore having a fourth university in his National Day Rally speech.
The Government has also said a new committee chaired by Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew will study how to expand the university sector, along with former deputy prime minister Tony Tan as adviser.
What I suggest is this: How about getting the real stakeholders of such a decision to be part of this committee or study as well?
That means students, parents, teachers and graduates.
Last week, Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam announced the three areas that the new committee will focus on.
It can be a European-style polytechnic, a liberal arts college focused on teaching, or having more polytechnics link up with foreign institutions to offer niche degree programmes, such as child psychology.
After all, if cities like Boston, Washington DC and Pittsburgh in the US can have several top-notch universities each, surely Singapore can have four?
The Government’s aim is to have nearly one in three — or 30 per cent, up from the current 23 per cent — of each cohort getting subsidised university education by 2015, equating to an additional 2,400 places.
The current Education Ministry regime has certainly rekindled the “learning” rather than “scoring” aspect of education, with widespread changes over the past few years.
I was at National Junior College a few weeks ago and saw so many changes.
Just four years after I passed through the same corridors, I felt it was a different place.
Students actually seemed to be doing something other than studying hard. For example, they were cheering for their Physics teacher, via a webcam, who was running one of the toughest marathons in the world, in the Death Valley.
Last year, as an alumnus, I was invited to teach students about entrepreneurship — a word I didn’t know much about while I was there.
The same school is so different now because students there have more choices on almost any aspect of their education.

Many more younger students have been added to the mix, through the Integrated Programmes.
Because of this, teachers willing to deviate from traditional classroom and textbook teaching methods have been brought in. This has further led to the incumbent teachers to mould their style as well, resulting in overall change.
The Education Minister rightly put it across when he said it is not about increasing university places, but about “choice, quality, differentiation and serving the market in a new way”.
To “create a new university with a new model”, there needs to be a new model to the steering committee itself.
Taking nothing away from them, the Government officials can surely tap on some fresh ideas by including the real stakeholders of our tertiary education system.
While the ministers and officials bring expertise and credibility to the table, recent graduates can be invited to provide feedback as to what changes they would like to see.
Recent A level holders can be asked for their aspirations, along with their parents’. Those students on scholarships overseas should be given an incentive to provide valuable feedback on what makes a path breaking institution; what would have kept them back home?
By next August, when the new committee presents its findings to the Government, the result of such a collaborative effort may have the potential to turn up unconventional results.
We all know we can do our bit to better our future in a concrete way. If given a chance, I would love to be on this committee. What about you?

The writer is a fresh graduate from the School of Information Systems, Singapore Management University.
To give feedback, e-mail sph@ph.com.sg