Fourth U will be different

It will have its own character and unique strengths to meet society’s needs

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PLANS for a fourth publicly-funded university have been given the green light, along with a new target to ensure at least 30 per cent of local students receive subsided university education by 2015.

Announcing this yesterday was Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who led up to the issue with an acknowledgement of how many have fretted this year over the availability of varsity places.

Currently, 23 per cent of each year’s cohort gets a place in one of the three local universities – the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University – up from 20.8 per cent in 2000.

The 30-per-cent target means an additional 2,400 places would be available each year to meet growing demand, said Mr Lee.

As such, “we should build” a fourth university and this institution will have its own character and unique strengths. It will be “different” from the other three.

Nor may the Government stop there, Mr Lee hinted – it may not limit itself to just one new institution to increase university places, as there could be others that offer alternative routes to a degree as well.

A new committee – chaired by Minister of State (Education) Lim Yack Yew, with the former minister in charge of Singapore’s universities, Dr Tony Tan, as adviser – will study how to expand the university sector. It will decide within a year how to proceed.

These changes are all part of the Government’s approach to “provide many ladders to success, and help you climb as high as you can”.

For example, 15 per cent of polytechnic graduates now proceed to a local university and more are getting degrees by other routes.

“We have invested very heavily in the ITE (Institute of Technical Education), polytechnics and universities. With good schools, more students want to go to university,” he said.

While hailing news of the fourth university, educators said it should be built in response to society’s needs and not simply to meet a growing demand for higher education.

Said NUS vice-provost for education Professor Lily Kong: “The critical issue now is to decide what form this university will take. Will it be an applied university or a liberal arts university? Is there a need for more engineers, perhaps? These are things the committee will have to discuss.”

Mr Lee also elaborated on the aim to “give every child a top-rate education”, through building up all neighbourhood schools in their own areas of excellence and “passion”.

He spoke of the “tremendous energies and enthusiasm” in Singapore, having recently visited two schools.

At Jurong Secondary, students from its digital video and drama class interviewed him on camera and then presented the Prime Minister with a DVD of his visit before he left the school.

At Mayflower Primary, he had asked teachers if they had any problems getting their children to speak up in class.

“Tt was greatly cheered by their reply. They said the problem was how to get them to stop speaking! They had to even appoint ‘noise managers’ in class,” said Mr Lee to laughter.

“Many more exciting things are happening in schools across Singapore. Whichever school you go to, whatever home background you come from, we will help you develop your talents to the full,” he promised.

More incentives to learn Malay at secondary school

The talk has long focused on the language skills necessary to engage with China and, yesterday, Prime Miniser Lee Hsien Loong spoke about the need to relate to the Malay-speaking region, too.

More incentives, he announced, will be dished out to encourage more Singaporeans to study Malay or Chinese – if it is not their mother tongue – as a third language.

Such secondary school students will soon enjoy two bonus points for junior college admission. Perks like these will be available to non-Malays who sign up for the Malay Special Programme (MSP) and non-Chinese students in the Chinese Special Programme.

The MSP has had a poor take-up rate since it was launched in 1985 for top Primary School Leaving Examination students to learn the Malay language and the cultural heritage of Malays. It remained unpopular despite being extended this year to all Secondary 1 students.

Mr Lee said that while many older Singaporeans spoke and understood Malay, “too few” of the younger generation did.

While the current mother tongue policy would not change, he said, it was important to learn Malay or Bahasa Indonesia to facilitate interaction with our Southeast Asian neighbours. As such, a Regional Studies Programme – where students take Malay as a third language and learn about South-East Asia – will be rolled out in three or four secondary schools.

A hundred scholarships will be offered to sweepen the deal, he added.

“It would be good if one of the schools can offer Bahasa Indonesia, I understand ... one school is already interested,” said Mr Lee.

Civil servants, too, will be incentivised. Ministry of Foreign Affairs officers already get a language allowance if they maintain a good grasp of languages to do their work better and this will be extended to more agencies that have extensive contact with other countries. — LEE U-WEN