Fourth varsity in four years’ time?

Tharman hints at institution that could be modelled on European technical university

LEE U-WEN

SINGAPORE’S fourth university – possibly a European-style technical institute – could welcome its first batch of students by around 2011, given the Government’s recent experience of taking three years to develop its last university from scratch.

More tantalising details were revealed yesterday, as Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam announced the three areas that the new committee looking to expand the university sector will focus on.

A fourth varsity is one possibility for Singapore – the other two being the setting up of a liberal arts college focused on teaching, and having more polytechnics link up with foreign institutions to offer niche degree programmes.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had said in his National Day Rally speech that Singapore “should” build a fourth university.

The aim is to have nearly one in three – or 30 per cent, up from 23 per cent currently – of each cohort receiving subsidised university education by 2015, equating to an additional 2,400 places.

But while the Government will help as many as possible, with more Singaporeans aspiring to a degree, Mr Shanmugaratnam said yesterday that the purpose of building another university cannot simply be “a game of numbers”.

“We have built three strong universities. That has given us the confidence to take this next step and build a fourth one, possibly more than that.

“It’s not just about expanding university places, it’s about choice, quality, differentiation and serving the market in a new way,” he said at a media briefing.

The vision is to “create a new university with a new model”.

While nothing is cast in stone yet, Mr Shanmugaratnam hinted at the form the new university could take.

One model his ministry is looking at closely is the system adopted by several European technical universities, such as those in Switzerland and Denmark.

One of the many examples he cited was the Royal Institute of Technology, a 180-year-old university in Stockholm that accounts for a third of Sweden’s technical research and engineering education capacity at the university level.

Besides courses in fields such as science and architecture, the university also has a technical preparatory programme for non-scientists.

Asked when the fourth university was likely to be ready, Mr Shanmugaratnam gave the example of how the Singapore Management University took three years to get started, from the time of its announcement to the day it accepted its first intake.

The new committee – chaired by Minister of State (Education) Lui Tuck Yew – will present its findings to the Government next August, which means the fourth university could open as early as 2011.

Mr Shanmugaratnam emphasised that the varsity would not be there just to open up more places for polytechnic graduates, or for applicants who failed to get into their preferred degree course elsewhere.

“The initial fear at SMU was that it would attract those that could not make it to the National University of Singapore (NUS) or Nanyang Technological University (NTU). But it showed, within a few years, that it wasn’t the case. There was a reshuffling of students across the universities,” he said.

Some, like SMU’s Assistant Professor Eugene Tan, said it would be a “big challenge” to conceptualise a new university that would not duplicate existing systems. “Can this fourth university cater to mature students and those from the Institutes of Technical Education? How about senior citizens who want to take courses to upgrade their skills?” he wondered.

On the possibility of a liberal arts college for Singapore – an idea mooted by the International Academic Advisory Panel in January – Mr Shanmugaratnam said it was “worth a serious study”.

Such a college is likely to follow successful models in the United States, which are small, have low teacher-student ratios and strong mentoring schemes, he said. Because of its size, it will not make up the full increment in university places on its own.

Having more tie-ups between Singapore polytechnics and foreign universities is one option that “could happen earlier”, Mr Shanmugaratnam added, seeing as how polytechnics have already started the ball rolling.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic, for example, recently partnered Wheelock College to launch a degree in early childhood education. Other specialised degree courses that polytechnics could offer in future include sports management and food technology – typically not offered at the local universities.

But why not do away with such options and simply expand the three local universities?

This “theoretical option” worked in the past but is no longer useful today, he said.

Both NUS and NTU are already large by international standards, so the education system would be better off in creating diversity, and having different teams of educators that can approach learning in new ways.

Taiwan made a very determined push to expand university places. Graduate unemployment among those in their early 20s is 12 per cent – thrice the national unemployment rate. We make sure we avoid these mistakes.

— Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam on expanding the university sector 'step by step'.