4th varsity may offer courses in high-growth industries

It will have an annual intake of between 2,500 and 3,000 students

By LEE U-WEN

PLANS to set up a fourth publicly-funded university in Singapore are beginning to take firm shape.

Two preliminary recommendations by the committee overseeing the local university sector's expansion were announced in Parliament yesterday.

The first, said the group’s chairman, Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew, is to have a new mid-sized university set up within a few years’ time, with an eventual annual intake of between 2,500 and 3,000 students.

These extra places will ensure that, by 2015, 30 per cent of each cohort will enjoy a subsidised university place. Already this year, one in four students will get a subsidised place, two years ahead of schedule.

Having consulted with industry leaders, students and parents, Mr Lui said possible courses to be offered could be an interplay between the fields of design, engineering and business. The focus would be on high growth areas such as clean technology and sustainable building design, and tourism and hospitality. "It was felt that a combination of such programmes would support the university's integrated, inter-disciplinary approach and provide rich opportunities for learning and collaboration," said Mr Lui.

For example, engineering students could practice design thinking and principles to help come up with creative solutions and products that suit the user’s needs. These students would also be well-versed in the business aspects of engineering that would help them develop strong project management and entrepreneurial skills.

The committee’s other recommendation is to establish a small liberal arts college, affiliated to one of the three existing local universities. This would allow the college to leverage on the branding and resources of the parent institution.

Already, the National University of Singapore (NUS) has submitted a proposal to develop the college as a “self-contained autonomous entity”, similar to the NUS-Duke Graduate Medical School. The Singapore Management University is also studying ways to offer a liberal arts education to its students as it expands its disciplinary coverage.

Mr Lui’s committee is expected to put up a recommendations report by the end of June, when it is due for discussion by the International Academic Advisory Panel. The final report is expected by this August.

On the recent announcement to raise university fees—an issue raised by three MPs yesterday—Mr Lui explained that 70 per cent of local universities’ expenditure goes towards manpower costs.

“Our universities must pay competitive wages if they are to compete effectively against global competition to attract and retain top quality faculty. This is necessary in order for them to uphold the quality of education they provide.”

Most students entering NUS or Nanyang Technological University this year will face a one-off fee increase of 4 per cent, or about $250 more per year compared to existing students.