Students raise questions on social inequality

QUESTIONS on social inequality and mobility came up a few times during a forum that Education Minister Heng Swee Keat had with university students at the Singapore Management University (SMU) last night.

A third-year student at the university, Ms Ann-Margaret Mathew, 22, said the Primary 1 registration system creates an uneven playing field for children as places are given first to those who live near the schools and whose parents are their alumni. She asked if the Education Ministry had plans to tackle this issue.

SMU alumnus Elvin Ong, 27, said he observed at a neighbourhood school that several students were too poor to buy red-and-white outfits to celebrate National Day, and asked if the Government had a clear policy on addressing the issue of social inequality.

Mr Heng said parents should change their mindsets and recognise that many neighbourhood primary schools are good too. He said: “Honestly, if parents’ mindset is that there is only one good school in this place, whatever system of allocation, whether by proximity, by pure balloting, by whether you volunteer and all, that will not have any good outcome.

“At the end of the day, there will be only that number of places and many more parents will be disappointed. What we need to do is have many more good schools, and we change the mindsets about what is a good school.”

He added that Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam would give more details on what the Government would do for social mobility in his Budget speech, but said the issue should be addressed by society as a whole.

“When we talk about creating opportunities for these students, it is not just what the Government does, it is what companies do. It is what the whole society does in terms of creating a more inclusive society and enabling people to move up.”

Mr Heng also fielded questions on whether the value of a university degree would diminish as more universities are established in Singapore, and what he thought the education system should achieve.

He said every university would provide a unique education and assured students that the value of a university degree would be preserved.

He also said schools recognised that each student was different and aimed to develop them based on their aspirations, interests and abilities.

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