

Panel looking at 'work-study varsity' model

It'll help meet demands of economy, aspirations of youth: Minister of State

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SINGAPORE must develop a more diverse higher education sector to meet young people's varied career aspirations, Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong said yesterday.

The country also needs a range of different types of graduates to meet the demands of an increasingly complex econo-

my, he added.

To help achieve this, a high-level committee studying how to provide more degree opportunities for Singaporeans is considering the idea of what is known as a "practice-oriented" university that is closely linked to industry.

Speaking to reporters, Mr Wong said the committee felt that there was scope to develop an institution which is "teaching oriented, practice-based, which has very close links to industry and where the educational experience will be different".

Fleshing out what such a university programme might entail, he said academic studies would be integrated with practical, hands-on work experience, and students alternate between semesters of full-time study and relevant paid work.

He cited Drexel University in the United States and Waterloo University in Canada as examples of such a model.

Most students in Drexel's more than 70 undergraduate degree courses alternate between periods of full-time classroom study and full-time professional employment. The private university's programme is so successful that a third of its graduates landed jobs with their "co-op" employers even as they were studying.

Waterloo, a public university, is said to operate the largest cooperative education programme in the world with more than 13,000 students enrolled in it. Its programme is so well-known that it attracts international students and a growing number of global companies including Bloomberg, Deutsche Bank and Google.

The minister was speaking to the media after a meeting with about 400 junior college and polytechnic students, university graduates and parents.

The two-hour townhall meeting at Ngee Ann Polytechnic was called by the 15-member panel that was set up last year to study how more degree places and education pathways can be opened up for Singaporeans.

Singapore will reach a 30 per cent university cohort participation rate by 2015, but Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said more university places should be created as the economy will need more graduates.

Some participants at the meeting asked if graduates of such a practice-oriented institution will be considered inferior to those coming out of research universities such as the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University.

In response, Mr Wong conceded that this would be a challenge that the Government would have to overcome. But he emphasised that these institutions worked closely with industry and involved companies in the whole process from curriculum planning to teaching and internship programmes. "By the time the students graduate, the employers have confidence that these are good quality programmes and that students are well prepared for the workplace," he said.

Commenting on the proposal, Mr Lee Kok Choy, managing director at Micron Semiconductor Asia, who sits on Mr Wong's committee, said: "Our local universities produce more research-trained engineers who work in research and development.

"But my company also needs maintenance engineers who come from a practice-oriented background and can service the expensive machines and equipment. At the moment we have to hire poly grads and train them to take on these positions."

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 See Prime Page A8