

Is a master's degree necessary for that career move or a luxury item?

Not all postgraduate courses need state funding; not at a time when the country wants to equip workers with job-relevant skills instead of fuelling a paper chase.



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Earlier in December, National University of Singapore (NUS) president Tan Eng Chye said the institution had started funding some of its master's programmes on its own, rather than rely on government subsidies.

Though NUS also clarified that this move had begun much earlier, the announcement was notable for the public signal it sent that the university will begin charging higher tuition fees for some courses, where it has not already. Drawing this inference, the news drew varying huge reactions, with some on social media suggesting locals will be "short-changed" and that the Government should continue to subsidise the cost of master's courses.

But such remarks conflate undergraduate education, needed for many entry-level white-collar roles, with postgraduate programmes, which may be motivated by a more diverse and nebulous set of goals. The comments also gave the impression that Singaporeans should be entitled to subsidies for a postgraduate degree if they wish to pursue further education.

A bachelor's degree is more likely to be a prerequisite for many jobs, and removing

government funding for undergraduate programmes will reasonably draw concerns. But the vast majority of jobs, mid-career switches and efforts to climb the corporate ladder do not require postgraduate qualifications, which are, arguably, luxury items.

In any case, NUS will be charging more for only self-funded master's coursework programmes, whereas all of its research-based master's degrees will remain subsidised by the Government. NUS also explained that selected coursework-based master's degrees continue to receive subsidies from the Ministry of Education (MOE), including the Master of Architecture, Master of Dental Surgery and Master in Public Administration.

WHY A MASTER'S HOLDS VALUE

Work and life aspirations have undeniably risen in Singapore in tandem with a more well-educated population. In a job market where the majority of people have bachelor's degrees – either from a local university, private institution or overseas – the thinking is that higher education can help people stand out from a crowd and secure better employment prospects.

Universities here know this and have correspondingly expanded their postgraduate offerings over the years. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, the number of students enrolled in higher degree courses – defined as full-time and part-time postgraduate diploma and higher degree courses – grew

steadily from 20,079 in 2016 to 23,417 in 2020, the latest year for which data is available.

These numbers are a surge compared with the past. In 1993, the earliest year data was recorded, the figure was 4,095. Engineering sciences, and business and administration were the top two fields for higher degrees that students enrolled in, followed by humanities and social sciences.

Now, depending on what type of postgraduate programme you take, you might get something valuable out of it that can aid in your next career move or teach you new foundational skills needed at your next job. Research-based master's programmes are taken up by those looking to pursue a career in academia or research, involving working on an independent research project and submitting findings in an original thesis.

Coursework-based master's programmes focus more on the impartation of knowledge and skills, and some are essential for individuals to progress in specific careers requiring technical training and specialisation, such as medicine, dentistry and architecture.

Then there are also programmes that may not be

necessary but are deemed highly beneficial for one's career, like the Master of Business Administration (MBA), the world's most popular graduate management degree for executives gunning for promotions and better job outcomes.

Some people take up master's degrees to give themselves an edge in a certain professional field or to prepare themselves for a career switch.

In particular, foreigners, who make up a significant proportion of the enrolment in master's programmes at Singapore universities, are attracted to the prospect of holding a degree bearing the name of NUS, which has, in recent years, risen in prominence in global university rankings.

Even if the courses are not directly related to their work at that point, some might argue that there are intangible benefits – such as learning higher-order thinking and analytical skills, gaining wider perspectives across disciplines and making connections with individuals who have a valuable network.

MOVING AWAY FROM PAPER CHASE

In this discussion over whether

postgraduate programmes should be funded and to what extent, while NUS has come under the spotlight and taken some heat, it is also worth noting that most other autonomous universities have differentiated funding support levels.

Most of Nanyang Technological University's master's by coursework programmes are already self-funded, following a revision that began in 2019 to make postgraduate programmes progressively self-financing.

The situation varies across the six autonomous universities – master's by coursework programmes at the Singapore Management University have always been self-funding, while its research-based master's programmes receive government funding.

All graduate programmes at the Singapore University of Social Sciences are self-funded, while all master's programmes at the Singapore Institute of Technology and Singapore University of Technology and Design are subsidised by the MOE.

With more coursework-based programmes being self-financed and the lowering of subsidies for foreign students and permanent residents (PRs) in recent years, the MOE said the annual savings

are being channelled towards providing Singaporean and PR adult learners with more bite-sized upskilling opportunities more compatible with work.

This shift is timely and necessary, given that the cost of running university courses is substantial, and Singapore is moving towards arming workers with job-relevant skills rather than academic credentials alone.

Former education minister Ong Ye Kung had said back in 2017, when announcing the differentiation of master's fees for foreigners and PRs, that MOE faces the "reality of a finite budget" as it was investing more of its resources towards short training courses for adult workers.

In any case, the Government already heavily subsidises education for citizens, from pre-school all the way up to the bachelor's degree level, in the belief that every student should be given equal opportunities to succeed regardless of their family's financial background.

Whether this holds true for postgraduate education is debatable, especially for programmes that primarily aim to give individuals a competitive advantage over others in the job market or to simply enhance their own professional credibility.

Even then, government subsidies are not the be-all and end-all to securing financial assistance for a postgraduate degree. The universities give out their own scholarships, subsidies or study awards to those keen on doing their master's.

Both the public and private sectors also regularly sponsor employees for master's programmes – local and abroad – as part of their professional development, talent grooming and retention initiatives.

The Public Service

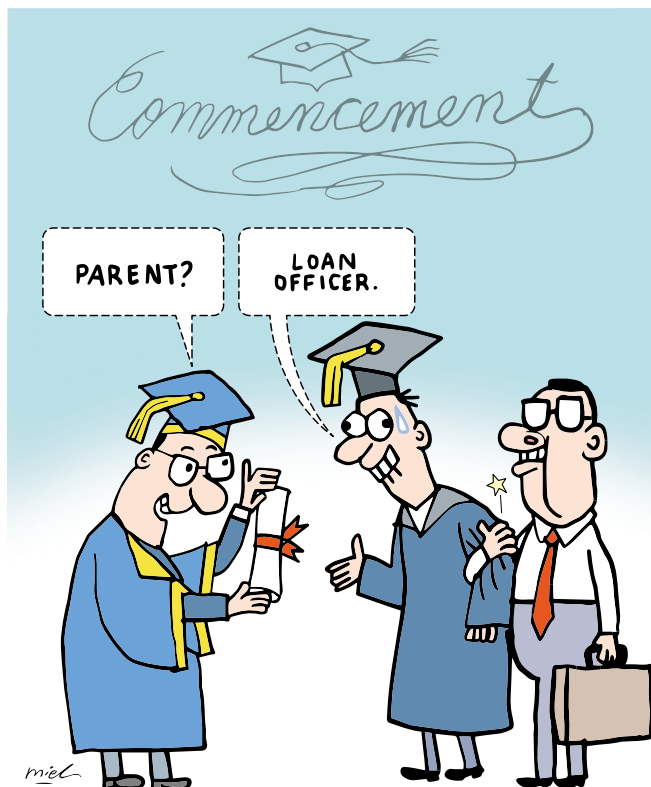
Commission, for instance, awards scholarships to individuals based on merit to pursue master's degrees in areas relevant to the public service. Scholarship recipients then go on to a career in public administration and are posted to a ministry or statutory board, depending on needs and how suitable they are.

Apart from government agencies, the private sector also supports the pursuit of advanced degrees. OCBC Bank has a scholarship targeted at individuals interested in taking up a full-time postgraduate qualification in artificial intelligence, in line with its push to develop in-house capabilities.

These arrangements work well as recipients are, in a sense, tied to their organisations and what they study, hence, tends to be more targeted and relevant for their careers.

Employers generally do not accord much attention to whether a job candidate holds a master's degree – work performance and contributions are arguably more key considerations. Dr David Leong, managing director of human resource consultancy PeopleWorldwide Consulting, said

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S'poreans spoilt for choice in learning

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that there are exceptions, like in consulting, where having an MBA is preferred.

"But a vast majority of jobs do not demand master's qualifications as the proof of worth is in a person's experience and precedent records like sales, connectivity to targeted key clients and familiarity with the industry. These other factors are critical determinants for wage-adjusted premiums since they contribute to revenue or sales in a company," he added.

MANY WAYS TO UPGRADE

At the end of the day, Singaporeans are spoilt for choice when it comes to options for learning beyond their undergraduate education. The desire of many Singaporeans to level up their skills, gain educational grounding and move up the career ladder is commendable and should be encouraged.

A rapidly evolving world of work means a basic diploma or degree may not be enough for most people to stay relevant in their jobs – the Government has made this clear with its push for lifelong learning and the institutes of higher learning taking on a bigger role in adult education.

But there are many ways to learn, from smaller stackable modules that provide targeted skills to fuller master's programmes. Beyond the traditional postgraduate qualifications, local institutions now offer more types of courses like micro-credentials, which may be more accessible to people and directly relevant to their work.

There are also a multitude of online courses and certificates one can earn on platforms, like Coursera, that provide flexibility for those who want to learn at their own pace.

In the light of the SkillsFuture movement and the many alternative pathways available to upgrade one's skills and knowledge, there is less of a case for government subsidies to be given to all master's programmes.

What is crucial is knowing how personal aspirations align with the realities of the job market and whether specific industries reward the pursuit of a master's programme.

The reality is that a master's degree is not meant for everyone. For most Singaporeans, it is a luxury good, which can cost anywhere from more than \$30,000 to \$100,000.

In fact, an overemphasis on gaining postgraduate credentials may even fuel an unhealthy and expensive paper chase.

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