

40% university cohort rate: Should it be raised in future?

More youngsters aspire to have a university degree. While expanding university places is one option, employers also need to change the way they assess job seekers



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This month, school leavers who had applied for a place in the local universities will be informed of the outcome.

It is likely that close to 40 per cent – around 15,000 applicants – of the age cohort will land a place in one of these institutions.

But at least another 10,000 applicants are likely to be disappointed at not being given a shot at a degree education here. This group does not include those who plan to pursue a degree later.

Back in 2012, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had announced that 40 per cent of the cohort would find university places by 2020. Since only 27 per cent of each cohort landed a place in the local universities in those days, going up to 40 per cent was seen as a big leap forward.

Though some raised concerns over a graduate glut in the future, a 40 per cent university participation rate is comparable with many developed countries around the world.

The Straits Times recently released the results of a survey of 19-year-olds it conducted in partnership with the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). Of the 1,056 surveyed in the second half of last year, 27 per cent said they were already pursuing a degree or had already secured a university place.

But of the others, 91 per cent said they wanted a degree on their resume. So it now appears that even the 40 per cent mark falls far short of the aspirations of school leavers and polytechnic graduates.

The hunger for degrees among young people was based largely on practical considerations. Some 81 per cent said it was to earn higher salaries, and 75 per cent said it would help them better compete in the job market and access the careers they want. Only 37 per cent sought this route for the status of being a degree holder.

Of a dozen 19-year-olds – from the

junior colleges, polytechnics and Institutes of Technical Education (ITE) – who were interviewed further about their degree aspirations, all said they hope to eventually head to university. This was true even of those who were aiming for careers where skills, rather than qualifications, will carry a premium.

Among this band is national shooter Martina Veloso, who won two gold medals at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, Australia, last year, and wants to be a full-time athlete.

Ms Veloso, who recently graduated from polytechnic with a diploma in sports and wellness management, said a university degree is her back-up plan for when she is done with her sporting career. She feels strongly that it will give her more options.

School of the Arts alumnus Nicholas Papayoanou wants to become an actor, but feels that a degree would signal to casting directors that he can get the job done.

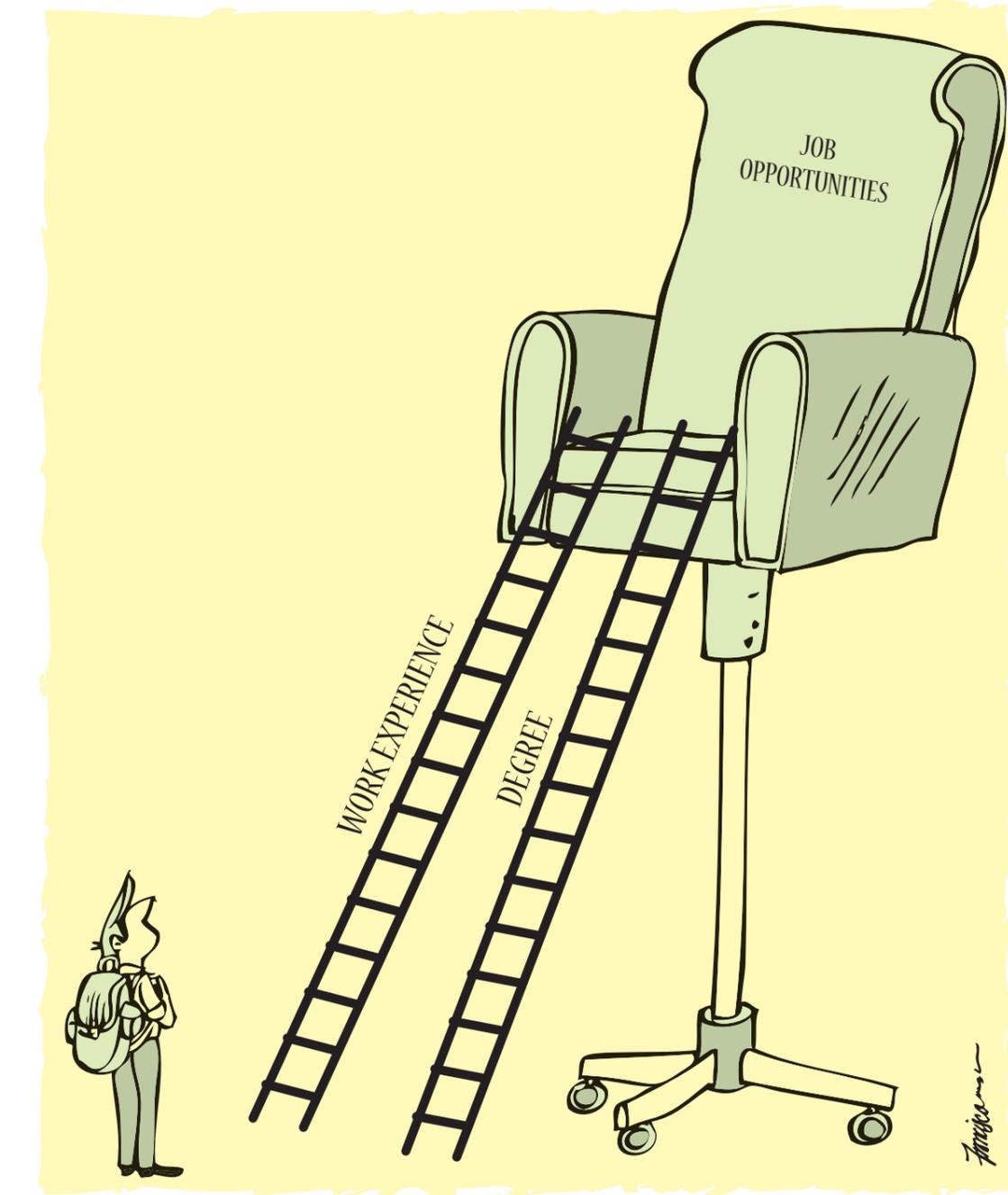
He said: "I do see the importance. It gives casting directors trust in your work. They know you have been trained and are capable of carrying the workload." He also said having a degree will help him climb the career ladder faster.

Three out of the four ITE students interviewed were also hoping to go on to polytechnic and eventually university.

In the light of the strong aspirations of young people, is it time to relook the university participation rate? Should policymakers consider raising it further to 50 or 60 per cent?

It is worth revisiting these questions at a time when the Government is pushing for Singaporeans to keep learning continuously so that they can reach their fullest potential. Seen through that lens, a conservative cap on university places seems counter-intuitive. The expansion of university places must not be seen as spurring a paper chase. It should be viewed as a chance for young Singaporeans to deepen their learning and skills to be able to seize new opportunities.

After all, as SUSS labour economist Randolph Tan commented of the survey results: "There is a sense that they want a degree for what it enables them to achieve. From the perspective of labour market performance, this evokes an image of pragmatism that we might have thought the



younger generation had lost."

MORE APPLIED DEGREE OPTIONS

The expansion of university places in the last six years has been done in a calibrated way.

The bulk of the new places have been offered by SUSS and the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). These are in applied, practice-based degrees in a range of fields where there is growing demand for workers, such as in social work and allied health. This has enabled more polytechnic graduates to upgrade their diploma to a degree through the local institutions.

In recent years, about one in five poly graduates won a place to study for a degree locally. Just five years ago, only 15 per cent – about one in seven did.

A polytechnic graduate with a

diploma in game design had to previously head overseas to study for a degree in the same field, often at high costs. Now the DigiPen Institute of Technology, considered the Harvard for game design and animation, offers its programmes with SIT and students pay a fraction of the costs.

It is the same for physiotherapy, occupational therapy and culinary science. In the past, polytechnic graduates and A-level holders had to head overseas, for example, to Australian or British universities, to top up their diploma with a degree.

Since last year, the Government has also started offering the SkillsFuture Work-Study Degree Programmes, where undergraduates spend up to four days a week at work with the programmes' partner employers – who co-design the programmes –

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with at least a day set aside for study. Students can also alternate between working and studying over the semesters.

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However, there is merit in expanding the number of places for applied skills-based degree courses that are in demand, and in disciplines relevant to Singapore's future needs. For example, until recently, occupational and physiotherapy degree courses were not available locally. Today, they are, but the number of places is limited. Meanwhile, podiatry degree courses, for foot and lower limb care, are not available in Singapore, sending those interested in such careers overseas. With an ageing population, Singapore will need more professionals in these healthcare fields in future.

Hence, if the Government decides that it can further raise the university participation rate, then it should do so in more applied courses, and also consider expanding the range of degrees and allowing more flexibility for young people to combine work and study.

After all, the ST-SUSS survey also found that young people want jobs with meaning, and they will even put purpose over pay cheques.

PURSuing PASSION

Several young people told The Straits Times they are interested in pursuing their passion in areas such as film-making, the performing arts and working with animals, including becoming veterinary surgeons. Many are also deeply concerned about the environment and issues such as social inequality, and want to pursue degrees that will enable them to work in related fields.

But as SUSS president Cheong Hee Kiat stressed when commenting on the survey findings – the Government must continue to open up alternate pathways to career success for young people.

It must also keep pushing the message that in this age when information can be "Googled", skills are what will carry a premium, not degrees.

Big companies like Google know this and put it into practice when hiring people.

Google has used data analytics for years to figure out how to hire people with the right fit. It found that there is no correlation between its good hires and the universities that they come from or their grades. As a result, Google hires many people without degrees.

The Government must also keep pushing Singapore employers, including the Government itself, to change the way they recruit, recognise and reward workers.

Only then can one reasonably ask young Singaporeans to pursue the qualifications they really need to access the careers they want, instead of chasing degrees that may be superfluous.

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