

# New rules for private schools bite

Almost half of existing schools expected to go, after industry cleanup

■ BY AMELIA TAN & LEOW SI WAN

THE cleanup of the private education sector has begun with the implementation of new stringent regulations, and it is likely to hit almost half of the existing institutions here.

In all, some 400 of the 1,000 private schools here are expected to go, the Council for Private Education (CPE) – a new statutory board charged with cleaning up the sector – said yesterday.

This is the result of either closures or mergers – with bigger partners or with schools owned by the same company.

The CPE believes that the changing landscape is the result of the new and tough Private Education Bill passed late last year as part of the Government's efforts to raise standards of the sector riddled with complaints from students and parents and, at times, troubled by sudden closures of schools, some of which were offering sub-par programmes.

The council, a Ministry of Education statutory board set up to regulate the sector, has started with the registration of schools.

Schools registered under the previous Education Act will have until June next

year to sign up under the new scheme. These include private universities, commercial schools and international schools. All the other schools had to submit applications to be registered with the CPE by February this year.

To be accepted, schools have to meet a list of criteria which include having proper systems, such as independent academic and examination boards; giving information on their finances, teachers and facilities; and ensuring that foreign institutions they have links with are up to par.

Should they fail to do so, they would have to shut down.

The cost and effort of meeting these requirements have already led some players to "reconsider" if they want to be part of the industry, said the CPE.

"For example, some of the private schools may be doing a lot of enrichment programmes, tuition and so forth. And maybe they have a little sliver of it, doing diploma or full-time certificates. So what they have decided is since the critical mass is in tuition, they may want to withdraw from this segment," said an official.

Hairdressing school Jantzen Academy is one such school and it has decided not to register. Said its spokesman: "All along, we have focused on training our own stylists and then take in some others who are keen."

"But it is very troublesome now. We have decided not to register. It isn't a big part of our business as well."

To maintain standards, all schools will



Second-year nursing diploma students attending a lecture at the Parkway College of Nursing & Allied Health, which has been awarded the Edutrust mark. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

have to renew their registration, the duration of which will vary. Those with better practices can go longer between registrations – between two and six years – while others may have to do it annually.

To date, only 62 schools have been registered in the ongoing exercise, and one has been rejected. Of the successful ones, 36 have a four-year licence while 26 have been registered for only a year. So far, the council has received 308 applications but close to half or 144 were incomplete and could not be assessed.

The CPE said a common document left

out by schools, which run programmes in partnership with foreign universities, is an original letter signed by the vice-chancellor of the foreign partner.

"We feel that this is an area where we probably want to have some workshops. We will bring the schools in to help them go through the process and documents they have to submit," said its spokesman.

The cleanup, said private school students, was timely but also very telling of the poor standards in the sector.

"There are some good ones but there are also others which are just there to

make money. They do not care about standards," said a former private school student who wanted to be known only as John. He was cheated out of \$18,000 for a bogus degree last year.

Since the CPE's Student Services Centre opened last month, it has received about 180 complaints and appeals from students over issues such as disputes over course fees, course administration and issuance of certificates.

The larger schools are seeing the new laws as a boon, allowing them to expand their businesses acquiring some of the smaller schools that fail to meet the requirements.

Said the chief executive officer of TMC Academy Chin Kon Yuen: "Acquisitions are definitely an area we will look in to once the situation has crystallised."

"Bigger schools will be keen to look at smaller ones which offer niche programmes to complement what they already have."

Agreeing, Kaplan's college director Jim Jackson added: "This is welcome news to Kaplan, not only because it creates opportunities to acquire and revitalise businesses under our academic infrastructure and brand, but it also helps the Singapore brand as a whole by culling marginal players."

Students can go to [www.cpe.gov.sg](http://www.cpe.gov.sg) to find out which private schools have been registered with the council.

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## No star rating for any of the schools

NO PRIVATE school has been deemed good enough to attain the Edutrust Star, the pinnacle of the accreditation system established by the Council for Private Education (CPE).

Even for established schools like the East Asia Institute of Management and the PSB Academy, more work has to be done to get to the top of their game.

But the two were among the six which made the grade for the new Edutrust mark, which will give prospective students the assurance that they are a safe bet.

To get the mark, the schools met the

standards in six areas including corporate governance, fee protection for all its students and academic processes, such as teacher selection and programme tracking and development.

The mark is good for four years.

The other four with the Edutrust mark are At-Sunrice Academy, the Singapore Institute of Management, Parkway College of Nursing & Allied Health and TMC Academy.

Getting the lowest-tier Edutrust Provisional mark – good for one year – were seven other schools that met the minimum standards for each criterion.

Those getting the Edutrust Provisional mark were Ascensia Academy, Curtin Education Centre, Dimensions International College, SGP International Management Academy, Shelton International College, SSTC School for Further Education and the STET Institute.

At a press briefing yesterday, the CPE said it had received 68 complete applications for the three-tiered Edutrust scheme.

The new quality assurance system was introduced as part of efforts to regulate the private education industry, which has been battered in recent years with schools closing abruptly and students losing their fees.

Among the first 18 applications

processed were five schools that were rejected.

The council declined to say which schools failed to make the cut, but noted they had been given feedback and can try again when they are ready.

Asked if it was cause for concern that no school had attained the Edutrust Star status so far, the CPE said it was not unduly worried.

The scheme is very new and schools will need more time to fulfil the many criteria involved, it said.

Leading private school SIM said it may not have obtained the star as it needs more time to insure the fees of all its students – a must under new rules.

Before the new legislation kicked in, schools needed only to insure the fees of

foreign students.

SIM has 20,000 students, out of whom 3,000 are foreign.

SIM chief executive officer Lee Kwok Cheong said: "We see this (getting the Edutrust mark) as affirmation in our investment in the quality of education SIM provides."

Failing to attain Edutrust Star this round, he added, is motivation for the school and its staff to work even harder.

Said Prof Lee: "Getting the Edutrust mark is not the end-goal, it is still the beginning."

He said the new Edutrust scheme would help to enhance the international reputation of the private education sector.

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