The government is making it more affordable for professionals, managers, executives, and technicians – otherwise known as the PMET group – to upgrade their skills or obtain new ones.

Outlining several new measures in his Budget statement yesterday, Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said that up to 10,000 places for diploma-level programmes in the polytechnics will be set aside for PMETs by 2015, an increase of 60 per cent from the current allocation today.

He added that about 30,000 people are expected to benefit from additional subsidies that will cost the state about $30 million a year. The aim, he said, is to strengthen the overall support for PMETs, who now make up more than half of Singapore’s total workforce.

Mr Tharman said that Singaporean adults who pursue their first degree or diploma on a part-time basis at polytechnics, publicly funded universities, SIM University (UniSIM), or the government’s Continuing Education and Training (CET) centres will now enjoy the same percentage cost subsidy as what a full-time student receives.

This means that a part-time engineering undergraduate at the Nanyang Technological University, for instance, would pay about $14,000 for a five-year course, down from the present $21,000.

Educators welcomed the increased subsidies and hoped that it would encourage more working adults to obtain higher qualifications, especially those who may have missed out on the opportunity earlier in life.

Cheong Hee Kiat, president of UniSIM, described the news as a “real boost” for all part-time students. “I think that, on the part of the government, there is clearly a significant emphasis on skills upgrading to open up more doors for people to go for such upgrading,” he told BT.

Meanwhile, trainees who obtain their first part-time polytechnic diploma, Institute of Technical Education Nitec or Higher Nitec certificate will benefit from increased subsidies through a “completion award”, said Mr Tharman. Those who complete their first Workforce Skills Qualification diploma or certificate can also qualify for this award, which will apply to Singaporeans who graduate from March 1 this year.

Mr Tharman also said that the Manpower Ministry would soon introduce an umbrella initiative for PMETs called Step – or Skills Training for Excellence Programme – with more details to be announced in the upcoming Committee of Supply debates in Parliament next month.

The minister also announced a $500 million top-up to the Lifelong Learning Endowment Fund, which will take the total fund size to $3.6 billion. “This will increase the base level of long-term assured funding for CET, to complement the allocations from future annual budgets,” he said.