

Funding boost for projects on family research

Fund set up to help form policy; academics can apply for up to \$100,000 per project

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THE Government plans to give about \$500,000 over the next year to independent researchers looking to study the family in Singapore.

This Family Research Fund will 'build a stronger evidence base to help shape family policies', said Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) Yu-Foo Yee Shoon yesterday.

Postgraduates and academics at local universities can apply for up to \$100,000 per project, while undergraduates can ask for up to \$1,000 per project. The fund will be open for applications next month.

Mrs Yu-Foo said that with changing family patterns, it was 'all the more crucial that we conduct regular research to stay abreast of current trends'.

For example, she said more research could be done on why younger Singaporeans expressed a desire to tie the knot and have children but marriage rates continued to fall.

Speaking to reporters, she suggested that the Home Ownership Plus Education scheme, an assistance package for low-income families, could be studied as the take-up rate had been lower than expected.

'I think it is a great scheme but is it the right approach? What do people want?' she asked.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan from the National University of Singapore said the new fund 'raises the status of family-oriented research'.

The fund was launched together with the Family Research Network, a forum for academics, undergraduates, policymakers and social service agency staff to discuss family-related issues. Mrs Yu-Foo said the network will focus on three areas: strengthening families, helping vulnerable families and developing ways to evaluate policies and services.

Yesterday, academics and MCYS staff spoke about marriage and fertility in view of the pro-family measures announced at this year's National Day Rally. The changes include extra maternity leave and a bigger Baby Bonus.

Associate Professor Straughan shared the results of a 2005 survey in which 1,510 individuals were questioned about their fertility decisions and family practices.

Respondents who had one child said the 2004 pro-family policies did influence their decision to have more children, but the policies did not affect those with no children.

Her research also showed that those most likely to have a child were those who felt child-bearing had material returns, including someone to care for them in old age.

She said the recent economic downturn could lower fertility rates here, which at 1.29 last year is among the lowest in the world.

But she said attractive pro-family packages unveiled this year might keep the rates constant.

'We might see more third, fourth or even fifth children,' she said.