

Millennials drawn to nursing, social work degrees

3 local varsities report more are opting for courses in caring sector

Sandra Davie
Senior Education
Correspondent

With their string of As, Ms Jessica Tan, 19, from Hwa Chong Institution, and Mr Benedict Choong, 21, from Raffles Institution could have vied for places in medicine.

But both opted for nursing and started on their degree programme last month at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

According to admission figures provided by three local universities, a growing number of young people are taking up courses leading to jobs in the caring professions such as nursing, social work, early childhood education, and allied health courses which include physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

The Singapore University of Social

Sciences (SUSS), which offered 61 places last year in its social work degree course, raised its intake to 84 this year because of higher demand, and its intake for early childhood education rose from 59 to 76 after places were seven times oversubscribed.

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) received 2,500 applications for the 300 places it offered this year in allied health degree courses.

SIT and NUS, which both offer nursing degrees, also reported an increase in applications and intakes.

The NUS Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies took in a record number of 310 students – a 34 per cent increase from last year and more than double its intake of 150 students in 2015.

NUS said more applicants had listed nursing as their top-choice

course and more of them had good A-level results. Among those who enrolled this year, there were 60 males, compared with 20 three years ago.

Professor Emily Ang, head of NUS' Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies, credited greater public awareness of the nursing profession for the increase.

"Today, nurses are increasingly recognised as professional members of the healthcare team who lead patient care in hospitals," she said.

NUS nursing graduates start their careers as staff nurses and can advance on the management, clinical or education tracks. The monthly median gross starting salary of registered nurses with degree qualifications is generally \$3,400.

While better job prospects were part of the draw, nursing undergrad-

uates say they were also looking for "meaning and purpose" in their future professions.

Mr Choong said that his parents had wanted him to apply for medicine, but he interned in a hospital and found nursing to be a meaningful job.

"Nurses interact more with patients and are not just concerned with treating their medical conditions, but also their psychological and emotional well-being."

He and course-mate Ms Tan hope to become advanced practice nurses who are trained in the diagnosis and management of chronic diseases in the future. They would have to undergo a two-year master's programme.

Full-time national serviceman Alfred Tan, 21, who will be enrolling in a social work degree course next year, said he has been volunteering

with social welfare groups since his JC days. He said: "I get worked up over issues such as poverty. So I decided, no point getting worked up – I should do something about it."

He added that salaries for social workers have improved. In 2012, the recommended starting pay for a social worker fresh out of university was \$2,760. It is now \$3,400, on a par with that of teachers.

SUSS president Cheong Hee Kiat said he is heartened that young people are fired up over causes such as social inequality.

"Among them are those who will take some action instead of being passive onlookers. The young should be encouraged to seek meaning and fulfilment through service to others on top of their own quest for personal career progress," he said.

sandra@sph.com.sg



NUS nursing students Benedict Choong and Jessica Tan hope to become advanced practice nurses who are trained in the diagnosis and management of chronic diseases in the future.
ST PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO