More students with diverse backgrounds admitted to Singapore universities

SINGAPORE: Universities here are looking beyond grades when it comes to admitting students.

While academic ability continues to be prized, many admissions offices say the A levels are a blunt tool to assess applicants, they are looking for outstanding students who show passion and involvement in their field of interest.

For 22 year old Timothy John, water sports have always been important.

He's on the national waterpolo team, and spends his waking hours between training and his studies.

"From the many years of training it's instilled a type of confidence and discipline in me, I am more resilient to hardships." said Timothy.

Kevyn Eng's passion is in broadcast - and he's even set up a radio station in SMU.

"I am not a person who is very good academic wise, on the other hand I have been shaped and moulded by whatever I did in JC." said Kevin.

For these students, they say not doing so well in their A levels made them a little worried when applying to university, but SMU looked beyond their results when assessing their applications.

The director of undergraduate admissions at SMU Alan Goh said, "We look for characteristic traits like creativity, passion, commitment, leadership, stewardship quality or any enterprising thing the person might have done as a student or as a student business person."

Over in NUS, the University Scholars' Programme has been admitting exceptional students since 2000, and not just on their grades.

"You can have a person intellectually extremely strong but nevertheless academic results not very outstanding, we have seen lots of such examples. That's why it's important for us to look beyond just numbers." said Prof Peter Pang, the director of University Scholars Programme at NUS.

"I came from a less renowned JC, so initially when I heard of USP, initially I thought it was just going to be another scholar's prog for the elite students. But I decided to give myself a chance a shot at it to be a scholar is not just about getting your As, it's about being able to take up that challenge, to put yourself to the test." said Godwin Tan.

"This is a programme that doesn't look at grades or how this person does in a formal curriculum, I think what they are looking for, is people who have that spark, people who have a passion in life." said Benjamin Lee.

NUS started admitting 10 percent of its cohort on a discretionary basis last year.

The Dean of Admissions at NUS, Assoc Prof Tan Thiam Soon said, "The university is beginning to want to have on campus a diverse student body bringing in different perspectives, different talents, different view points to build up a more vibrant learning environment on campus. We want to look at capturing students beyond just one single academic grade."

The changes in the university admissions scene seem to signal a new direction in education.

And for a country where exam grades have always been so important to both parents and students, it seems there's much more to get out of school now than just textbook learning. - CNA