YOUNG & RESTLESS

For some, school days also mean hard work

And they don’t let their grades suffer despite punishing 18-hour schedules

BY GOH WEN ZHONG

THE poster image of tertiary education — studying in campus foyers, spending long hours in the library — is for some not quite a reality.

Singapore Management University (SMU) student Huang Wanwen and ITE Bedok student Muhd Elfie Abdullah work tiring 18-hour days while keeping up their grades.

When Wanwen, 21, is not attending classes as a business management student, she holds down three jobs: She is an administrative assistant with SMU, a teleprompter with Channel NewsAsia, and a video operator at the Turf Club.

The money she earns takes care of her living expenses and 20 per cent of her school fees — about $5,000 in total a year.

A student loan takes care of the rest of her school fees, but she will have to start repaying the $20,000 when she completes her three-year course next year.

Elfie’s weekdays are just as exhausting. They extend from eight hours at school to six hours at a fast-food outlet, where he does everything from frying fish patties to serving customers.

The 19-year-old’s $700 monthly income goes to household expenses — including the $100 he gives his unemployed mother — and the rental ($26) and utilities ($80) for their one-room HDB flat. He also pays his own school fees of $25 a month.

Unlike most of their peers who might be working just to gain experience and for pocket money, for these two, the hard-earned cash supplements family incomes.

But neither complains. For them, reality does not bite. “I don’t see the jobs as a burden,” Wanwen says cheerfully. “In fact, they are a bonus because I have always wanted a career in the media industry.”

Her father has been unable to hold down a job since a serious spinal injury at work 16 years ago. Her mother works on and off as a domestic helper. Her elder brother, a medical student at the National University of Singapore, does his best to help out by working part-time when he can, but otherwise Wanwen is on her own.

And she has managed well so far, with a consistent B-grade average in her first two years at university. “It’s about time management, and taking one’s studies seriously,” she says. Even though finances are tight, Wanwen never fails to buy snacks and biscuits to share with her family when she can, and help out at home.

“We may not be well-to-do but we’re happy,” she says.

Elfie’s marathon days are something he is upbeat about, too. “I don’t blame my mother; if I don’t take care of her, who will? Life is not easy, but it’s up to us to live it the way we want to.”

And the way the youngster from a single-parent home lives his life has earned kudos from his work supervisor, Mr Terence Chen, 24. He calls Elfie’s attitude an “excellent” example for his younger colleagues, adding: “He’s a real asset.”

Elfie just says with a modest smile: “I just do my best.”

The writer is a third-year law student at the London School of Economics.