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**Headline:** Varsity entry not all about grades

By Ho Ai Li

FORMER national judoka Cheryl Goh, 24, is a stellar performer at the Singapore Management University and heading for first-class honours in her business course. Yet, four years ago, she had the door slammed in her face by university admissions officers. She was a polytechnic graduate then and her B-grade average was not good enough.

After The Straits Times reported how she had been rejected, several readers wrote in urging the universities to give her a second look.

The newest university, SMU, just a year old then, did: Said Cheryl: “They were really taking a bold step in granting me an interview. They were telling the entire education system that grades were not everything.”

Since its inception in 2000, the SMU has prided itself on shrewd talent-spotting, assessing students on not just examination grades alone, but looks at their co-curricular activities (CCA) record, makes them write a reflective essay and go before a panel to demonstrate that they have something different to offer.

Students like Cheryl now have a better chance of getting a place at National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with the latest announcement by the Ministry of Education that co-curricular activities (CCA) would not be counted as points in the admission score, but, instead, will be taken into account for “discretionary admissions”.

It is the latest move in a shift from using academic results as the sole yardstick of success.

Last year, both NUS and NTU started admitting up to 10 per cent of students on a discretionary basis, with NUS taking 250 and NTU, 71 students, and were deemed to have the X factor.

What does it take to show you have what it takes in spite of your grades? Among other things, a demonstrated passion for community service, participating in fundraisers outside school, or starting a business and artistic talent. As it did last year, NTU will set aside exam grades and scrutinise 470 applicants' special attributes at interview this year. It will be looking for signs of leadership potential and young people who are creative and committed.

For example, NTU first-year communications studies student Han Weiding, 20, had A-level grades of A, B and C, but persuaded interviewers that he deserved a place in the popular, oversubscribed course.

What clinched it for him were his keen interest in music — he has been entering writing contests since he was 13 — and his knowledge of video production.

Similarly, first-year accountant student Tan Chee Woon, 22, impressed by having won the highest award for scouts in 2003 for his devotion to community service.

NTU dean of admissions Kwok Chan expects students to show that judo was just something the SMU is already doing.

The SMU monitors its student athletes closely and allows them to skip a semester if necessary. Cheryl, for example, missed a semester for the SEA Games in 2003 and received extra coaching to catch up afterwards.

As first-year journalism student Alan Goh told The Straits Times: “They have this highly competitive streak in them. They are winners. In society, we need winners like them.”

Cheryl, Seng Song is now repaying the university’s faith in him, averaging a fairly good 3.45 grade point average (GPA) while training up to five days a week with the national team.

The SMU took in Seng Song for business management after looking at his O-level results, Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) score and athletic achievements.

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The universities are also looking for something the SMU is already doing.

When Cheryl was asked what her experience with judo was like, she replied, as she described her interest in the arts and told them that judo was just one facet of her life.

Despite the changes being made, all three universities say that students must meet minimum academic standards, unlike some American universities which set aside places for athletes regardless of their academic ability.

National sprinter Poh Seng Song, 22, who scored a D and two Es for his A levels is now a first-year business student at SMU, but it might have been harder for him to get into the NTU or NUS.

NTU’s Professor Lun said: “It’s painful for the student and it’s painful for us to admit the student if he or she cannot cope with university demands. Then someone asked her: “Besides judo, what else are you good at?” Many things, she replied, as she described her interest in the arts and told them that judo was just one facet of her life.

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