Early start for 780 NSmen under reduced service scheme

BY LIAW WY-CIN

ABOUT 780 national servicemen (NSmen) will start university up to four months ahead of their freshman peers in the next few months.

They are taking advantage of a scheme introduced this year as a follow-up to the reduction in the duration of military service, compulsory for Singaporean and eligible permanent resident males.

Those with a place at any of the three local universities can take up courses from next month to July, before the academic year begins in August.

This allows them to complete the 30 to 40 modules required for a university degree earlier.

When national service (NS) lasted 2½ years, before June 2004, training for many ended around the middle of the year and NSmen entered university soon after. But with NS now just two years long, NSmen complete their training around December or March, leaving them five to eight months before university begins.

Singapore Management University (SMU), the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) usually have about 4,300 NSmen with reserved places in any year.

This year, SMU has 52 NSmen enrolled to start school early, NUS about 500 and NTU 230.

They can take up to four modules in the next four months. This means they can graduate about three to four months earlier, if they wish. However, some courses, like medicine, dentistry and law, do not have this early graduation option as these degrees are regulated by external professional bodies and follow a more fixed structure.

Women and foreign students cannot take up the early start option as their application for places at the universities are still being processed at that time.

But for these young men who have been away from books for about two years, the early start is not so much about graduating early.

Said Mr Winston Wu, 21, who completed NS in November last year: “We can only take a few non-core modules so it won’t really speed things up much.

“I just want to go in early to see the culture, to get used to the environment, to acclimatise to student life again.”

Mr Wu, who will study business and accounting at SMU this year, has been working as an auditor’s assistant. The oldest of three children of a technical producer father and a purchasing manager mother, he starts classes at SMU in June.