Average grades? Getting into uni is a squeeze

All 3 universities say Dragon Year cohort plus rise in quality have hit the chances of average students

By JANE NG

A RISE in the number of university applications this year, partly due to the Dragon Year cohort, has resulted in those scoring average grades being squeezed out of a varsity spot.

Dragon Years, being particularly auspicious in the Chinese Calendar, are usually associated with a spike in the birth rate.

Mr See Chee Wee, 55, a retiree whose letter was published in The Straits Times Forum page yesterday, said his daughter, who had applied for arts and social sciences, had been rejected by all three local universities despite scoring grades of A, B, and E for General Paper.

"She has not met all the criteria for entry to a local university. Not all students are outstanding, you know. But I'm sure you can't say there's no space. If I buy a ticket for a movie, there better be seats for me," he said.

"If I had enough money, I would send her overseas and not argue. Now I will have to mortgagemy house. You're marginalised in Singapore if you don't have a university degree," he added.

Replying to queries, the three universities said the sheer number of applicants, coupled with an overall increase in quality, has left those with average grades out in the cold.

"It is likely that, depending on which degree programme this particular applicant has applied for, she does not meet our admission requirements on an overall holistic assessment," said a Singapore Management University (SMU) spokesman. SMU assesses its applicants based on their academic credentials, co-curricular activity records and performance during an interview.

At SMU, 35 per cent of A-level applicants scored A, B and C or better in their results compared to 30 per cent last year. At the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), 35 per cent more applicants had at least three As this year than last year.

The increase in quality has meant universities were more selective in choosing applicants. For instance, the National University of Singapore (NUS) Law Faculty considered only those with three As for its interview and test.

NUS received a total of about 34,000 applications for around 6,600 places; NTU got 35,000 applications for 5,850 places; while SMU received about 12,900 applications for 1,485 places.

At NUS, 15,700 A-level school leavers from the Dragon Year cohort applied, an increase of 2,200 from 13,500 last year.

Dean of admissions Associate Professor Tan Thiam Soon pointed out that even though the universities are dealing with the Dragon Year baby boom, the number is not as large as parents imagine because only the A-level girls are entering university this year.

The Dragon Year boys will be admitted only in two years' time, after national service. Those who entered polytechnics will also enrol in universities later.

Universities also say they have hedged up enrolment to cope with the expected increase in applications.

For example, NUS has increased its overall enrolment by 200 spots across all its faculties, while SMU has a new degree which will take in an additional 82 undergraduates.

An NTU spokesman pointed out that applicants applying for a particular programme should have good grades for related subjects:

"For example, a candidate wishing to pursue Communications Studies should have a good grade in the General Paper," he said.

Students who have yet to hear from the universities about their applications said they don't have high hopes. One, who scored B, C and E and applied to the NUS Arts and Social Sciences Faculty, said: "I don't think I stand a chance. I will probably start looking at overseas universities next.

Additional reporting by MADDALYN NG

Letter to The Straits Times, Forum, 29 May 2007

A, B, E but no place in the local universities

MY DAUGHTER'S recent applications for entry to the three local universities – Nanyang Technological University, National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore Management University – were all rejected. The reasons given were an overwhelming response, limited places in the universities and stiff competition.

My daughter is an average student who had excelled in sports. She has met all the criteria for entry to a local university. Is being eligible not enough? Must one now get extraordinary grades to be granted a place in university?

Like her, many young Singaporeans her age must have had their dream of pursuing a higher education dashed recently. Ironically, the universities are still advertising for applications. Are they looking for A-star performers who have more than one option? Are they raising their standards for applicants so that they will be able to improve their world ranking – just like an elite school or junior college that accepts only the best in Singapore so that ultimately its ranking will be at the top?

The Minister for Education had said that "no Singaporean should be deprived of a good education", so what about the many students, like my daughter, who are qualified to enter university after two years of hard slog, only to be told that they had not been selected due to limited vacancies and stiff competition?

The Education Ministry should look into this problem with a sense of urgency as it only shows a lack of planning to meet the aspirations of young Singaporeans who want to study for a degree. Local universities are publicly funded. Isn't it about loyalty and kinship that citizens are given a chance to study there as long as they are eligible for entry?

Are my daughter's grades of an A, B, C (General Paper) and an E not good enough?

My son, who is 27 years old and had A-level grades of B and C, graduated with a Second Upper Class Honours degree in the Arts and Social Sciences at NUS.

See Chee Wee