Few takers for early start

Most NSmen forgo uni scheme as finishing course early is ‘dicey’

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ONLY a small number of those who have completed their full-time National Service (NS) stint have opted for early admission to university.

Just 516, or 13 per cent, of the 3,890 NSmen who qualify have applied for the scheme and are starting classes within this couple of weeks, three months ahead of the cohort, who begin in August.

In the past, only those who had already started their university courses could opt for the special term, a window during varsity holidays that allows them to take modules so as to ease their regular semester workload.

By taking modules during the special term and taking extra modules during the semesters, the students would be able to graduate about six months earlier.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is taking in 255 special-term NSmen, the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), 209, and the Singapore Management University (SMU), 52. SMU’s NSmen began classes two days ago, while those NSmen who enrolled at NUS and NTU will start on May 7.

The scheme kicked in after the Government reduced the full-time NS term to two years for all in 2004. Previously, those with A-level and tertiary qualifications had to serve 2½ years.

Why the poor takeup rate for a scheme that allows for early completion of a degree programme?

Mr Dominic Su, an NSman joining NUS next month, said: “Some of my peers did not enrol for the special term because doing so does not guarantee that they will graduate early.”

Not only might they have difficulty coping with the more intensive workload but, in the case of NUS, they may also not get the course they want. NUS fills places for oversubscribed courses by random ballot. Mr Su failed to secure two popular courses that he wanted. Now, instead of the maximum four modules, he will take only two.

And three NSmen who chose to start early at NUS have been put on the waiting list because their courses are oversubscribed.

An NUS spokesman said early graduation for the likes of Mr Su is still possible as he can opt for courses that have vacancies. But Mr Su is not interested in taking those courses, he said, just to get his degree earlier.

SMU restricts its students to a maximum of two modules during the special term. An SMU spokesman said the cap is to ensure that students are not overburdened.

Mr Winston Wu, who is at SMU, said while it is plausible that he graduates early, he is not betting on it because “the workload will be heavy”.

And there is also the consideration of cost.

In addition to the annual tuition fees — $5,930 for NUS and NTU, and $6,500 for SMU, based on 2005-2006 rates — NSmen have to pay between $500 and $800 for each special-term module. Only by finishing the course earlier will they save on one semester’s fees.