Smaller cohort, but universities getting more applications

Numbers up by nearly 5,000; surge linked to increased places, more aspiring to a degree

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UNIVERSITY applications surged this year to $8,606, up from 53,853 last year.

Of the total, 36,858 applications were from A-level students and 21,748 were from polytechnic graduates.

Most applied for two, if not all three, universities.

The increase occurred in spite of last year’s batch of A-level school leavers being about 1,000 fewer than that of the year before.

Those eyeing a place in university this year had hoped it would be easier to get in, not only because of the smaller A-level batch, but also because of the Government’s announcement that 25 per cent of the graduating cohort would be offered places, compared to 23 per cent last year.

In total, the three universities are offering 14,700 places this year.

The Ministry of Education (MOE), which released the latest application figures to The Straits Times, said the Government’s announcement that university places would be increased might have encouraged more school leavers to apply this year.

University officials said that there were more repeat applicants this year – a quarter of the A-level applications were from repeat applicants. Last year, this group made up only 16 per cent of applications.

Students and parents, however, put the increase down to more aspiring to go to the university.

Said parent R. Velu: “A degree is a must, so every A-level and polytechnic student who meets the cut-off will try.”

He admits that his son’s scores – a B and three Cs – are average and may not get him a place. He is considering downgrading from the family’s five-room HDB flat to send his son overseas.

University admission officials are unable to offer consoling words to parents like Mr Velu, whose son applied to study business, one of the most popular courses.

Some of the courses are over-subscribed many times over, making it harder to get in without strong grades.

Like last year, the most sought-after courses this year include business, accountancy and arts and social sciences.

National University of Singapore vice-provost (Education) Tan Thiam Soon asked students to consider any offer of a place, even if it is not in their top-choice course.

“Students think if they pick a course, they are locked into it. That’s not the case. Universities allow a lot of flexibility in mixing and matching courses. Engineering students can do a second major or even a second degree in business or law. The future is for them to define,” he said.

Singapore Management University (SMU) officials also had similar advice. Its most sought-after course is business, but an SMU spokesman said its first batch of social science graduates have just completed their studies and many have been offered jobs in banks and multinational corporations.

However, applicants such as Miss Karen Teo, 20, felt that the Government should consider increasing the number of places in popular courses.

Said the Ngee Ann polytechnic graduate who hopes to study business or accountancy: “I am just following my interest and passion.”

Her housewife mother, Madam Tan Ai Nah, 44, said the Government should be planning for a fifth university, not just a fourth.

The MOE said it recognises the aspirations of young Singaporeans to pursue a university education and that is why it has significantly increased the number of university places over the years.

It is targeting to provide subsidised university places for 30 per cent of each cohort in 2015. On top of that, it is also providing generous subsidies for part-time degree students at the three universities and SIM University.

But a ministry spokesman said university places have to be increased in a measured way so as not to compromise standards. The ministry must also meet the economy’s needs in planning for university places.

“We need to ensure that our university graduates are able to find good jobs after graduation,” she said.