

Growing demand for courses in early childhood education

Better career path and training awards help draw more students

Priscilla Goy

Despite a general decline in applications to polytechnics, diploma courses in early childhood education have bucked the trend.

More people have enrolled for diploma courses in this field in recent years, and there has been an overwhelming response for degree courses too.

This comes amid efforts to attract and retain pre-school teachers in the manpower-starved sector, which has been expanding to meet young families' rising de-

mand for pre-school services.

Singapore has around 16,000 pre-school educators, and another 4,000 are needed by 2020.

The Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) is the only public university here to offer a full-time degree in early childhood education, which will start in July. The course had more than 480 applicants – eight times the number of places offered.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NP) offered a total of 480 places for its diploma course in early childhood education, and another in child psychology and early education this year. Both are over-subscribed. It offered 240 places in 2015, and over 90 per cent of them were filled.

Temasek Polytechnic (TP) offered 200 places this year for its

diploma course in early childhood studies, which has been fully subscribed. Two years ago, 90 per cent of the 125 places were filled.

Mr Ang Teck Hua, head of the Centre for Early Education at TP, told The Straits Times: "There is an increase in the take-up rate despite the overall drop in the number of polytechnic applicants, which could be due to declining birth rates."

He said the greater interest in such courses could be due to factors including better career progression pathways and training awards from the Government.

Institutions have also tweaked their selection processes to focus less on exam results and more on skills and hands-on experience.

From 2015, NP and TP admitted up to half of their intakes for early

childhood courses using criteria other than exam results – up from a cap of 30 per cent for other courses.

Last year, NP added a group activity segment to the selection process. A spokesman said: "Students work as a team to use available materials to create items and lesson ideas for teaching young children in the classroom. This allows the (judging) panel to assess their ability to work well in a team, and traits such as respect and humility."

At SUSS, shortlisted applicants without an early childhood diploma from the polytechnics must go for a two-day attachment at a pre-school.

Dr Sirene Lim, academic lead of the early childhood education programme at SUSS, said: "We hope this will help candidates make a fi-

nal decision about whether this is what they would like to sign up for because, in our full-time course, students will have to spend chunks of time attached to pre-schools."

Training providers said they also work to ensure that their courses have practical components that prepare students for the job.

Dr Kok Siat Yeow, deputy director of programmes at NTUC's Seed Institute, said: "Our training pedagogy is very hands-on. We want to ensure that our graduates can apply what they have learnt and are ready to fulfil their roles as early childhood educators. Even in the early stage of their careers, they will be able to impact the lives of the children they care for and teach every day."

Mr Ang Hin Kee, executive secretary of the Education Services Union, which represents pre-school teachers, said: "Having a more skills-focused selection process and curriculum would help ensure that more students join the pre-school sector after graduation."

"But it comes down to career progression opportunities and support from operators and parents for pre-school teachers to sustain their passion in the sector."

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Dedicated scheme for trainees

When it comes to the practical training of pre-school teachers, one problem is that trainees often do not get the attention they need at busy pre-schools.

To plug the gap, a dedicated practicum programme – which provides practical training and has staff whose main role is to guide trainee pre-school teachers – has been expanded to more locations.

The programme was launched by St James' Church Kindergarten (SJCK) and philanthropic house Lien Foundation in 2014, and is offered at the kindergarten's Harding Road campus. The specialised staff are called "mentor supervisors", and there are now three of them. The programme was extended to SJCK's Gilstead Road campus last year, and will be rolled out at its Leedon Road campus next year.

So far, more than 120 trainee teachers, mostly diploma students, have been through the programme.

Mentor supervisor Nancy Choon, who assessed trainee teachers during their practicum at other pre-schools from 2013 to 2015, said: "Some trainees felt their practicum experiences were quite hurried. Usually, their mentors are principals or educators who are held up with administrative work and day-to-day operations."

At the SJCK centre, about 60 per cent of a trainee's practicum experience involves teaching or assisting teachers. The rest of the time is spent on activities such as sessions in which mentor supervisors observe lessons with trainees, and discussions on practicum assignments or topics like classroom management.

Dr Sirene Lim, the academic lead of the early childhood education programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, said: "This structure is better than having educators who have a heavy workload and still need to multi-task and find time to speak with student teachers."

Ms Stephanie Soo, 21, benefited from the practicum scheme and joined SJCK full time last June. She said: "The mentoring was very focused and detailed. If I had questions, I wasn't afraid to ask as I was confident that my mentor supervisors had the time to help me."

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St James' Church Kindergarten teacher Stephanie Soo guiding her Nursery 2 pupils in basic pronunciation during an English lesson. The 21-year-old, who benefited from the dedicated practicum programme for trainee pre-school teachers and joined the kindergarten full time last June, said the mentoring was "very focused and detailed". ST PHOTO: FELINE LIM