

# Should schools enforce community work?

Some feel such mandatory service becomes an obligation, doesn't come from the heart

Wong Shiying

Community work by tertiary students here has often been a voluntary effort but another school has recently made it a compulsory part of its students' curriculum, raising the question of whether kindness should be enforced or graded.

At Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NP), every diploma course will have at least one module that has a "service learning" element, in which students de-

sign projects to solve existing problems in the community. A score is given to students based on an oral or written report of their experience and their ability to apply academic knowledge in the project's design. Some 22 service learning modules will be rolled out this year. This will grow to 50 modules by 2018.

Singapore Management University (SMU) has made it a requirement for its students to complete 80 hours of community service in order to graduate since the university

opened in 2000. The service performed, however, is not graded.

Since 2013, all second-year law students from National University of Singapore (NUS) and SMU have to perform 20 hours of pro bono work, which is, however, not graded. For SMU law students, this accounts for part of the 80-hour requirement.

For other NUS students, community work is not a must. At SIM University (UniSIM), students have to do projects to help needy groups after the university rolled out full-time undergraduate degree programmes in 2014. Students are given one of three banding grades.

For NP, one reason for grading community projects is that "assess-

ing students helps them reflect on whether their projects have met the needs of their beneficiaries, rather than just going through the motions", said Ms Choo Cheh Hoon, the polytechnic's service learning steering committee chairman.

Mandatory community work could have encouraged students to volunteer more of their time, said SMU dean of students Ong Siow Heng. Students, on average, put in 145 hours of community work, more than the required 80 hours.

On how mandatory community service could benefit students, Mr Marcus Chee, strategic partnership director at the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, said it rec-

ognises that "not everyone is aware of, or has the opportunity to be exposed to, the varied needs within our community". So, there is "a role to play in providing some form of framework to facilitate and support the process", said Mr Chee.

Still, the other three publicly-funded universities and remaining four polytechnics do not enforce community service. A common reason cited is that they prefer to encourage students to do community work by providing opportunities and funding.

Said Nanyang Technological University associate provost Kwok Kian Woon: "We believe in fostering in students a sense of community service voluntarily, rather than making

it a requirement to graduate."

Some tertiary students are not in favour of having community service enforced. Ms Cheryl Tan, a 21-year-old third-year SMU accounting student, said: "When (community service) is compulsory, it becomes an obligation and doesn't come from the heart."

Grading community work is also an issue with some. Said a Singapore Kindness Movement spokesman: "The threat of a failing grade is counter-intuitive to the objective of inculcating civic-mindedness. Kindness should not be graded, but appreciated for what it is."

sywong@sph.com.sg

Source: The Straits Times @ Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction