

## More university students take break from school to focus on personal goals

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There are signs that more university students in Singapore are willing to take a break from the academic rat race to achieve other personal goals.



University students attending a lecture.

SINGAPORE: Their numbers may be small but there are signs that more university students in Singapore are willing to take a break from the academic rat race to achieve other personal goals.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), 340 students, or 1.26 per cent of its 27,000-strong undergraduate population, took leave from school in the last academic year 2012/2013.

This is a 10 per cent increase compared to just two years ago (2010/2011).

The numbers include students who took leave for industrial attachments, internships or practical training, but these were not the usual exchange programmes, and did not earn students credits that count towards university graduation.

For Nanyang Technological University (NTU), numbers have been steady at about 20 students every year on average; while at Singapore Management University, three students took leave for two or more consecutive terms last year.

NTU has about 23,500 undergraduates, and SMU has 7,000.



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Local universities say most students who take a gap semester or year do it to train for a sporting competition, work, or start a business.

But some are also taking time off to do community service.

Isaac Ong took not just one, but three gap years.

After national service, he deferred university to volunteer and help young people.

He volunteered for the chaplaincy team at St Hilda's Secondary School for nine months, offering tuition and counselling students who needed help.

Issac also started a project called #freemovement to inspire young Singaporeans to help out or simply cheer up the most vulnerable in society.

One of his #freemovement projects saw him and his team give out free ice cream to foreign workers in Little India.

Issac said: "I'm unable to build houses for the poor or provide jobs for the foreign workers, or be able to give them tons of money. But I really believe strongly that whatever your age and whatever capacity you've got, whatever money you have, find a way to bless people.

"What you take away from that is that you learn about them, you bless and you make them smile. Sometimes it's all they need, sometimes you don't need the money, you want friendship."

Three years later, he is back in school.

Isaac is enrolled in a private Communications and Psychology degree programme at SIM Global Education.

He said: "When I go to class, I'm not there just to get the grades anymore. When I study my sociology class or my psychology class or my communications class, everything has an element of how do I give back to the community, how do I possibly earn a good enough profit to be able to give back? I think that really drags me out of bed early in the morning to go to school."

Issac's parents were apprehensive at first.

His father Ong Kim Hock said: "He might be behind some of his peers who would probably, by then, be doing quite well at work. Or have a job. But this is something he wanted to do. So as parents, both myself and my wife believe that if the child knows what he wants to do, we should, behind the scenes, do whatever we can to support him. Because he has heart to do community work and help out young people."

Educators like NUS sociologist Paulin Straughan said the modular system of universities today give students the flexibility to take a break from school, and not lose momentum when they return.



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Associate Professor Straughan said: "I would usually advise my students not to worry too much, because we live a lot longer now. In the grand scheme, you know, of life expectancy (of) 80, 85 years, what is six months, or one year?"

Going back to school and picking up where you left off in class is not really an issue, but what about joining the workforce? Do employers see value in a community or enterprise experience?

Stephen Tjoa, partner for people, performance and culture at KPMG, said: "In doing a certain project you'll probably have to display teamwork skills, leadership skills, obviously inter-personal skills. All these things actually, when you put them together, they're going to be of benefit to an employer."

Good grades remain important for a fresh graduate looking for jobs, Mr Tjoa said, but personal projects that show drive and passion can also be a plus.

- CNA/gn