How to ace aptitude-based admissions

Prepare yourself well as varsities adopt various means of assessment, including personal essays and interviews

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Q *My grades are good, but not good enough to get into the competitive courses such as computing or business, so I am hoping to get into university through aptitude-based admissions. How is it done? And how can I prepare myself for it, especially for the personal essay and interview?*

A Those hoping to land a place through aptitude-based admissions do not have to depend just on their grades. Their other achievements as well as aptitude and interest in a course are taken into account as well.

The Education Ministry recently announced that in a few years, as many as half of the undergraduates admitted to the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) may be selected on their aptitude and interest in the courses they apply to. The other four universities – the Singapore Management University (SMU), Singapore Institute of Technology, Singapore University of Technology and Design, and Singapore University of Social Sciences – already use a broader criteria, including looking at a student's interests and suitability for a field of study.

The ministry had also said that from this year, NUS, NTU and SMU will no longer offer discretionary admissions, which is a scheme that sets aside 15 per cent of places for students who fall short of the entry cut-off score, but who may have other achievements. They will, instead, assess students more broadly using aptitude-based admissions, covering as many courses as possible.
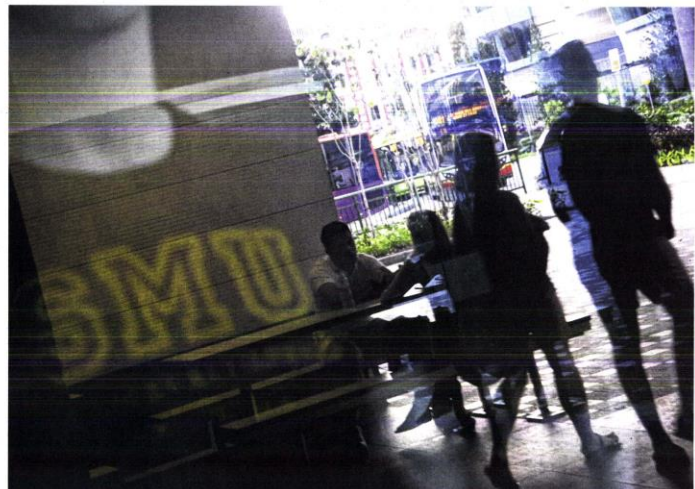
Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said NUS should move in the same direction as NTU, which recently committed to extending aptitude-based admissions to 50 per cent of each intake over the next few years. Last year, 38 per cent of NTU's 6,400 freshmen won places based on more than just their grades. This, after the university introduced a broader admissions process to select students for 40 of the 111 degree courses it offers.

Mr Ong had said: "To enable more porosity across pathways, our admissions system needs to rely less on academic grades, and more on other meritorious yardsticks, so that the full range of an individual's aptitude and attributes can be taken into account."

NUS and NTU, which together took in more than 13,000 students last year, are increasingly using aptitude-based admissions and can now confidently identify students who possess the skills, competencies and passion to do well in their chosen courses.

For aptitude-based admissions, all six universities use various means of assessment, including personal essays, group and individual interviews, portfolios and even aptitude tests, such as coding tests for computing-related courses.

Essentially, what the universities are looking for is summed up well by the SMU admissions office which said: "Beyond academic grades, we are looking for interest in SMU and the programme that the student applied for, passion for learning, traits of resilience and innovation, good analytical and critical thinking skills, whether students are team builders and players, have good communication skills, and have an inquiring and questioning mind."

For your personal essay, you need to make a good argument on why you are deserving of a university place in a particular course and if given a place, how you hope to contribute to the student body. Avoid exaggerating. It is important to come across as sincere and genuine. Please do not copy someone else's statement or pay someone to write a statement for you, because the admissions dons will be able to sniff that out during the interview process.

Similarly, think about how you can convince the interview panel that you are deserving of a place. Explain what drew you to that degree course – perhaps you enjoyed studying this subject in junior college – and how the subject fits in with your career goals or other aspirations.

Spending some time to think about your replies is well worth it. It will help you think of the right things to say so you can answer more confidently without stumbling and fumbling for ideas and words.

Don't overdo the practising though. You don't want to sound too rehearsed at the interview. The idea is to be relaxed and confident.

Some universities, like SMU, also conduct group interviews. So, it is more like a group discussion. Think about how you can stand out from the others, but at the same time it is important to listen to what others have to say and contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way.

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From this year, the Singapore Management University – as well as National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University – will no longer offer discretionary admissions. They will, instead, assess students more broadly using aptitude-based admissions. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

askST
you ask. we answer.

TRAITS THAT ARE VALUED

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SMU ADMISSIONS OFFICE