

# Looking beyond grades for course on social work

In this part of the askST education series, The Straits Times answers two questions from parents on the Singapore University of Social Sciences



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**Q** Can my daughter who has average grades get into a local university like the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS)? She is interested in social work and is involved in charity work. To be safe, should she also apply for other courses so that she can get into university?

**A** It is admirable that young people such as your daughter aspire to work to bring about positive changes in people's lives.

I am not sure what you mean by "average grades", but first, I want to make the point that admission to universities is not based on academic grades alone.

All the local universities, including SUSS, use a more holistic admission process where they look beyond academic grades. This is especially so for courses such as social work, early childhood education and nursing where the universities also look for interest and aptitude in the field.

For entry into SUSS, the minimum requirement is two A-level passes for the part-time programme.

The selection is a bit more stringent for the full-time programme,

and better grades are required.

SUSS uses a four-stage selection process for its full-time programmes, which comprises a 30-minute essay, a 12-minute cognitive test, a group discussion and an individual or cluster interview.

The interviews are used to gauge applicants' interest in social work. Here, your daughter's involvement in voluntary work will put her in good stead.

SUSS' four-year Bachelor of Social Work is a direct honours programme designed to develop a student's knowledge and skills as positive change agents in society. It also prepares students for indirect social work in the areas of social policy, planning and evaluation.

SUSS has done away with the usual lecture-tutorials way of teaching and, instead, uses blended learning, which means all the materials are available online before the start of the course.

Students usually go through the PowerPoint slides, study guide and lecture recordings before class. The classes, usually with about 40 students, are meant for students to clarify what they could not understand from the materials.

The lecture will also use case studies and other means to illustrate how theories are applied in practice. Most SUSS lecturers are practitioners in the field or practitioners-turned-academics. There are usually robust discussions in class.

SUSS is also known for its close collaboration with the industry, which allows the lecturers to review and make quick changes to the curriculum when new needs

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arise. The university also sends its students out into the industry for practicum and research collaborations where they get to work on real-world problems.

Social work students are also required to complete 1,000 hours of supervised social work in organisations, take up an overseas experience and have community engagement. The university aims to produce graduates who are professionally competent, social-minded and self-directed learners.

Social work graduates, SUSS says, can look forward to enriching careers in family service centres, children and youth centres, hospitals, hospices and other community or social service agencies.

There will always be a demand for social workers as new needs continually arise in society, and as people become more forthcoming in asking for help.

The Ministry of Health and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) are the biggest employers of social workers, but other groups such as the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Education (MOE) also employ them. MOE, for example, deploys social workers to schools.

The starting salaries of social work graduates compiled by NCSS range from \$3,500 to \$4,400.

**Q** I run a small business and believe in the value of combining work with learning. Hence, I want my son, who is applying for a business management or marketing degree, to take up a course where he can alternate between work and study. I hear that universities like SUSS offer work-study degrees. Do students take longer to complete these degrees and what are the job outcomes for these graduates?

**A** SUSS offers SkillsFuture Work-Study Degrees (WSDegs), which combine academic learning and workplace learning.

These programmes are co-designed by SUSS and companies to closely integrate classroom learning with structured on-the-job training.

Students acquire work-relevant skills through on-the-job training, making them more work-ready upon graduation.

At SUSS, WSDegs are open to individuals who have been accepted as full-time undergraduates by the university and by a host organisation offering on-the-job training.

Most WSDeg students take about the same time to complete their degree programmes like other normal degree programmes, which is four years or shorter.

As an illustration, a WSDeg student may study full-time in Years 1 and 2 of his or her programme, followed by an attachment to the host company for a minimum duration of 12 months in the third

and/or fourth year.

Students may alternate between spending one to two semesters in university and at the workplace, or spend several days at work and university during a week.

The on-the-job training, co-designed and co-delivered with partner companies, provides students with learning opportunities to apply the knowledge they acquired in the classroom at the workplace.

SUSS currently offers WSDeg programmes in accountancy, human resource management, business analytics, finance, marketing and supply chain management.

One obvious advantage of work-study degrees is that the students acquire deep, work-relevant skills and can better transit to the workplace upon graduation.

Employers say they support the programme because students gain a strong grounding in applicable theory in a real work environment, which enhances their job-readiness.

Students can also learn more about the sponsoring company's work culture and they stand a good chance to be offered career opportunities with the organisation upon graduation.

The partner companies offer a stipend and other benefits during on-the-job training.

SUSS says 15 of its 24 WSDeg graduates to date have chosen to work in the same company upon graduation.

The Singapore University of Social Sciences (above) uses a holistic admission process in its selection of applicants, which may include essay-writing and a cognitive test. PHOTO: SUSS

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