Full steam ahead for full-time degrees

After good track record, UniSIM’s full-time programmes will be publicly-funded

MEDICAL social worker Julia Lai, 40, would have preferred to have done her degree in social work full-time, instead of part-time.

But SIM University (UniSIM) currently offers only part-time degree and master’s programmes. Ms Lai enrolled in UniSIM in 2008 and graduated last year.

Said Ms Lai: “A full-time degree programme would have been more fruitful since I already have the desire and have already decided to invest my energy in this field (social work).”

She took a 50 per cent pay cut from her previous jobs to work as a volunteer executive with a welfare organisation and later on as an administrative assistant in a small firm while she was studying for her Bachelor in Social Work at UniSIM.

She declined to reveal how much she was earning.

The university will soon be able to offer full-time courses.

Following up on Prime Minister’s Lee Hsien Loong’s announcement at the National Day Rally, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat said during a media conference yesterday that the decision to introduce publicly-funded, full-time degree programmes in UniSIM was based on the “good track record” of its part-time degree programmes that have “close linkages” with the industry, for instance, logistics and supply chain and social work.

But Mr Heng added that he had met many students at UniSIM who told him that they found it “useful” to take the part-time degree path. He said: “It gives them a chance to realise what their passions are, what they want to do (while they’re working) and then it becomes clearer what university degree they want to pursue.”

Doing a degree full time

But doing a degree full time could mean finishing the programme and entering the workplace faster, Ms Lai said.

She told The New Paper that the part-time three-year programme was “drawn-out” and “a test of stamina and finances as you have to balance your job demands and assignments”.

One of them was fulfilling a 400-hour placement at a social work agency at the end of her third year. Said Ms Lai: “I had to quit my admin job in order to participate in industry placement. This meant I went without salary for 2½ months, and on top of that, we weren’t paid during our placement.

“It was hard to find work after the placement was over because exams were in November and the results come out in December, and employers prefer to employ you after your results are out,” she said.

“The opportunity cost is higher the longer you take to complete the course.”

Ms Lai graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work last year and started working for Alexandra Hospital (Jurong Health) in January.

Details like when the full-time degree courses at UniSIM will start, the type of courses and whether its full-time degree courses will be shorter than its part-time programmes have yet to be finalised.

A UniSIM spokesman said that under its part-time programmes, students can take a minimum of three years and at most eight years to complete the course.

“The actual duration varies depending on the number of credit units or courses students choose to pursue in each semester.”

UniSIM president Professor Cheong Hee Kiat told the media during the press conference that it will take “some time” before such details are finalised.

“We want to look closely at what programmes are suitable... We really need to look at industry and businesses, and see what do they need, how can we shape our programmes that will fit their needs,” said Prof Cheong.

Mr Lee had also announced that the Singapore Institute of Technology will become Singapore’s fifth autonomous university. (See report, above.)

The announcements were part of the recommendations of the Committee on University Education Pathways Beyond 2015 the Government had adopted.

The Committee was formed last year and headed by then Minister of State for Defence and Education, Mr Lawrence Wong, to study the university landscape and propose recommendations on its development.

SIT to offer undergrads work attachments

SINGAPORE Institute of Technology (SIT) will become the fifth autonomous university and award its own degrees. It will offer a Cooperative Education Programme, which could see undergraduates taking on work attachments.

This will be different from the usual internship programme as students will be paid wages like regular employees.

SIT’s president-designate, Professor Tan Thiam Soon, explained the difference.

“...It’s not an internship, (where) you go in, just sit around, observe a few things and then write a report. These people will be expected to work on real projects,” he said.

He said SIT would work with industry players.

“...We have to work with the industry so that they actually get real wages as well, because they’re doing real jobs.”

Education Minister Heng Swee Keat noted that SIT, like SIM University, had strong links with industry and was “well-positioned” to pioneer the applied degree pathway through its partnership with overseas universities.

SIT, which takes in A-level and polytechnic students, offers a number of programmes with a strong applied element in partnership with overseas universities, such as in digital animation, engineering, allied health, early childhood education and culinary arts.

Last year, there were 34 industry partners sponsoring scholarships for 12 per cent of its students in various disciplines.

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