The desire for a career switch drove three graduands of a little-known transportation studies course to take the road less travelled.

Their decision paid off.

Today, Mr Chong Wah Lih, Ms Esther Lim and Mr Zhang Tao join 14 others at the graduation ceremony for the Master of Science in Urban Transport Management – a programme conducted by SIM University in conjunction with the LTA Academy.

They are the first batch of students to graduate from the 18-month programme – the first in the region that focuses on urban transport management.

Mr Chong, 34, Ms Lim, 28, and Mr Zhang, 31, have already landed new jobs.

Mr Chong and Mr Zhang, both previously engineers in the semiconductor industry, are now transport planners with rail operator SMRT. Ms Lim, who used to be a chemist, is now a planner at the Land Transport Authority (LTA).

“This course has provided me with a holistic view of what urban transportation entails,” she said.

For Mr Zhang, a native of Liaoning province in north-eastern China, entering transportation was almost second nature as most of his family members work in the transport field in China.

“The programme was the brainchild of Professor Cham Tao Soon, chancellor and chairman of SIM University’s board of trustees. Prof Cham said: “For any city, there are two main issues to grapple with – housing and transport. In Singapore, we’ve taken care of housing from the early years of Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s leadership. But in transport, I don’t think we really understand it yet.”

He said the Urban Transport Management course offers “a structured way of understanding transport”.

Dr Park Byung Joon, who heads the programme, admitted that it is “still a very small programme”. The first intake in July 2010 had 18 students – one dropped out – and the second had eight. Ten signed up for the third, including one student from Malaysia and two from the United Arab Emirates.

Dr Park described the course as “academically rigorous and practically relevant”, leveraging on LTA’s expertise and experience.

While other local institutions such as the National University of Singapore teach transportation studies, the SIM University programme puts an emphasis on urban mobility. It is suitable for those with or without an engineering background.

CHISTOPHER TAN

Transport management grads get speedy job offers

(From left) Mr Chong, Mr Zhang and Ms Lim, who are graduating today with a Master of Science in Urban Transport Management from SIM University, already have jobs as transport planners with SMRT and LTA. ST PHOTO: TED CHEN