

More older people are heading back to university at a time when their peers are thinking of retirement. In the final part of a series on ageing well, our correspondent explores what drives seniors back to college and whether fast-ageing Singapore can offer more options in senior learning.

More seniors back in school



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When Dr Sorinder Singh, 65, began practising medicine in 1980, the general practitioner had hardly any elderly patients.

Thirty-five years on, he still works out of the same spartan clinic at the foot of a Housing Board block in Marsiling.

"I've grown old and so have my patients," the genial father of three grown-up children says, with a laugh. Roughly a third of his patients are in their 60s or older. Many come in wheelchairs.

To better manage his geriatric patients – he has treated centenarians and his oldest patient today is 99 – Dr Singh will soon complete a one-year Diploma in Geriatric Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is currently the university's oldest student, out of nearly 70 people aged 50 and above who are enrolled in various courses.

At a time when many of their peers are dreaming of scaling the next career peak or thinking of retirement, scores of older Singaporeans are returning to university.

Figures from four universities here show that more than 700 students enrolled in diploma and degree courses are aged 50 and above.

The vast majority – more than 80 per cent – attend SIM University (UniSIM) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The former has seen enrolment numbers among its seniors double in just five years.



General practitioner Sorinder Singh, 65, will soon complete a one-year Diploma in Geriatric Medicine at NUS, where he is currently the university's oldest student. Figures from four universities here show that over 700 students enrolled in diploma and degree courses are aged 50 and above, and the numbers could rise.

Experts say that these numbers may well rise further as younger, better-educated cohorts enter the second half of their lives.

Some, like Dr Singh, do it out of pragmatism and a desire to do better in well-established careers. Others are driven by passion, pursuing the long-treasured dreams. Yet others do it to jumpstart a second career.

As he frets about how he has done in his examinations – his final exams were held yesterday – Dr Singh says he is glad he went back to school. "I learnt the basics of wound care and about the many

new community resources for older patients," he says. "This will definitely help me look after older patients better, especially as they age at home."

The oldest student at NTU, meanwhile, is cut from a very different cloth. Stella Kon, 71, the award-winning playwright, novelist and poet, is pursuing a Master of Arts degree partly by research. The grandmother of six is best known for her one-woman play, *Emily Of Emerald Hill*, about the life and times of a dominating Nyonya matriarch.

Ask why she is seeking a master's degree in creative writing after a successful lifelong love affair with words, and she breaks into verse, quoting Irish poet W.B. Yeats' *Sailing To Byzantium* about the agony of old age and the intellectual and spiritual pursuits required to remain vital:

*"An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hand and sing, and
louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal
dress..."*

She has especially enjoyed a

course on the history of literary theory and criticism – right from the Greeks to modern times – and is getting her supervisor's help with her next personal project: scripting a musical on the life of physician and social reformer Lim Boon Keng.

"As a mature student, I found that while the brilliant young graduate students had deeper knowledge of their subjects than I did, I did have a wider general knowledge of the field – as I have four decades more experience than most of them," she says, sitting in the living room of her elegant

book-filled HDB flat in Owen Road. "I could see some connections they might have missed."

Most senior learners who are pursuing bachelor's degrees do so at UniSIM. Graduate students, meanwhile, prefer NTU, NUS and the Singapore Management University.

In recent years, NUS had a 71-year-old who completed a PhD in the arts and social sciences, while SMU had a student who completed a master's in law at the same age. The oldest student who ever enrolled at UniSIM was 86 when he graduated with a bachelor's degree in general studies a few years ago.

The largest number of learners who are 50 or older are enrolled at UniSIM. The university offers them a discount of up to 20 per cent for some of its courses, including the Bachelor of General Studies and its Continuing Education and Training (CET) programmes.

UniSIM president Cheong Hee Kiat tells *The Sunday Times* that there has been an increasing trend in recent years of seniors returning to school. "Learning keeps the mind engaged and helps harness interests they could not satisfy earlier," says Professor Cheong, who sits on the government-appointed Lifelong Learning Council.

However, Singapore universities have some way to go to catch up with institutions of higher learning in places such as the United States, Japan and Hong Kong.

In the US, for instance, community colleges offer a variety of courses targeted specifically at seniors for a low fee or free of charge. "The men like to do history – many are veterans and have witnessed history being played out," says Prof Cheong, who visited one such college in New York. Women prefer courses like counselling, gerontology and teaching.

There are more than 1,000 university programmes designed for seniors in the US. Many are short courses and seniors need not sit exams. "In Singapore, we need to find ways to build more learning communities for seniors that cater specifically to their needs and interests," he says.

From its early years, UniSIM has been promoting its shorter CET courses as an attractive, viable way for seniors to learn. These give many seniors who did not go to university the chance to keep learning, accumulate credits and perhaps one day fulfil a long-cherished dream.

Ms Elaine Tan, 64, fits the bill. Like many in her generation, the daughter of a small-time businessman began working straight out of school and now works as a finance manager in a small architecture and interior design firm.

Supported by her boss, she began taking short courses in finance and accounting at UniSIM in early 2013 and has accumulated enough credits for a bachelor's degree, which she hopes to pursue next year.

"I find studying a meaningful way to use my time after work," says Ms Tan, who is single. "I want to study and work for as long as I can."

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In class to learn, and make friends

In a dimly lit room in Chinatown Point, a small group of older men and women peer intently at a PowerPoint presentation as their instructor deftly teaches them how to edit videos they have shot.

Mostly in their 60s and 70s, the students have signed up for eight weekly sessions of three hours each. The classes are organised by the University of the Third Age (U3A Singapore), one of the newest channels in Singapore for seniors to learn.

Set up by the Singapore Association for Continuing Education in March last year, U3A Singapore is part of a global movement with the same name.

It enables like-minded seniors to form "learning communities" based on their individual skills and interests. It already has more than 400 members in Singapore, says its president, Mr Goh Kim Seng, 71.

Many of its courses have proven popular – one on applied psychology for seniors, for instance, has 100 people waiting to enrol. Class sizes are generally limited to 20 to enable better discussions.

Indeed, while the number of seniors heading to university here is relatively modest, thousands more are enrolling in short courses to learn a skill, forge new friendships or seek intellectual stimulation.

U3A Singapore is but one of several organisations offering such opportunities and the Government has made many of these courses free for seniors for this year as part of the SG50 celebrations.

"What makes us different from those who go to university is that

there is no stress, no exams," says Mr Goh, a retired management consultant. Both his children live overseas. "No grandchildren here, so I have plenty of time to follow other pursuits," he says with a laugh.

Other organisations with similar mandates include the People's Association's Senior Academy, Yah! Community College and the National University of Singapore Senior Alumni.

The senior alumni, a group of older graduates from Singapore's oldest university, celebrated its fifth anniversary yesterday at a gala dinner attended by Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

It organises monthly tea and chat sessions with experts on a range of topics, from current affairs and the latest developments in technology to health and retirement finance and reminiscing about milestones in Singapore's history.

The group comprises NUS graduates, past faculty members and their spouses. Most are in their 60s and 70s or older. Several members are in their 80s and some are 90 plus, said Senior Alumni president Rosemary Khoo, 72, who graduated 50 years ago with a bachelor's degree in English and Economics. She later did her master's and completed her PhD in applied linguistics from Australia at the age of 45.

For Dr Khoo, who is widowed and has no children, these informal gatherings are filled with "fun, fellowship and discovery".

"It's our way of remembering the past and staying engaged in the present," she said.

Radha Basu



Mr Jesudas Menon conducting a lab test on a research subject, Dr A. Saravana, to check the effects of exercise on fats in the blood. At 61, Mr Menon is doing a master's in sports science.



Mr Allan Foo (foreground), 63, attending a class during his executive MBA programme at SMU in 2012. The average age of the students in the class was 43. He was the oldest student.

Never too old to study

Jesudas Menon, 61

A long-time head of physical education at National Junior College, Mr Menon was in his mid-50s when he retired in 2010.

Way too young to sail into the sunset, he took up an adjunct position at the National Institute of Education the next year to teach sports science.

He had a master's in PE from the University of Oregon, which he completed in the early 1980s. But times had changed and much of what he learnt back then had become obsolete.

So in 2013, the father of two grown-up daughters decided to embark on a second master's degree, this time a research degree in sports science, at Nanyang Technological University. His research involves measuring the impact of exercise and meal frequency on fats stored in the blood.

"The programme has made me update my knowledge and fulfil a long-cherished dream of working in a lab," says Mr Menon, who plans to advance to a PhD programme, which he hopes to complete by the end of next year.

Allan Foo, 63

Like many in his generation, Mr Foo did not go to university. His parents split up when he was in national service and he decided to start work soon after.

In his 30s, he enrolled in evening classes at UniSIM to do a diploma in management studies and then a postgraduate diploma in marketing. He quickly climbed up the corporate ladder, becoming group marketing director of Yamaha music in 1988.

By the turn of the century, he had struck out on his own, opening a marketing consultancy firm, advising retail businesses on how to grow their client base. In 2006, he began a skincare and women's wellness business which is thriving today.

Then, in 2010, the eldest of his four children enrolled at the Singapore Management University to do a double degree in business and law. "Seeing my son at university made me want to go back, to get a proper degree."

By the time his second son enrolled at Tufts University in the United States, Mr Foo had completed an executive master of business administration programme at SMU's business school. Coursework sometimes began at 9am and ended at midnight. "It was exhausting, but I enjoyed every second of it," he says.

What he does not say is that he was voted the most outstanding student in his class.