

BY PEARL LEE

FEWER students are taking literature at the upper secondary level, pointing to fewer believing in its relevance and raising concern about the impact on cultural development here.

Last year, about 5,500 students took the literature O-level examinations, a slight drop from the 2012 figure of about 6,000 students, figures from the Ministry of Education (MOE) showed.

The drop came mainly from students taking elective literature – a half subject that is paired with another half subject, such as geography or history, and counted together as a whole subject.

Last year, about 3,100 students took the full literature exam while another 2,400 took the elective option at the O levels. In 2012, about 3,000 students sat for each paper.

This decrease comes while the number of schools offering the subject may even have

Dearth of literature students raises concern

gone up.

More than 80 schools offered full literature and more than 50 schools offered elective literature as O-level subjects last year. In 2013, the figures were more than 70 and more than 50 respectively.

The issue of declining literature enrolment has generated interest in the arts and literary community.

In May, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) launched a series of roundtable discussions with the Singapore Art Museum on cultural policy, beginning with one on literature education in schools.

IPS senior research fellow Tan Tarn How, who chaired the discussion, told *The Straits Times* that the state of litera-

ture education is tied to cultural policy as the study of literature helps groom arts practitioners such as writers, playwrights and film-makers.

“If we have so few students studying the subject, does it affect the number and the quality of practitioners, such as writers and playwrights, being produced? Who are the people who are able to do such work?” Mr Tan questioned.

At the closed-door discussion, Angelia Poon and Suzanne Choo from the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education presented a paper discussing the factors that could have led to falling interest in literary studies in secondary schools.

Among them: Parents and students perceive the subject to be difficult to score well in, and to have little practical value. The selection of texts is also unappealing to teens.

New Town Secondary School student Wayne Lee, 16, decided to take geography instead of literature as she found the latter “very difficult to learn”.

She said: “We read Shakespeare’s *The Merchant Of Venice* in Secondary 2 and it was so tough. I had to translate each page into modern English. I decided not to study literature after that.”

Assistant Professor Choo had analysed the O-level prescribed texts from 1990 to 2013 and found that excluding

the anthologies, 65 per cent of them were from authors originating from England, Ireland and the United States. Authors from Singapore accounted for up to 10 per cent of the texts, while those from Africa accounted for 14 per cent.

This has led to a lack of cultural representation, she added.

The IPS report noted that many participants felt the list of prescribed texts could be updated and made more inclusive. It added that teachers tend to stick to “tried-and-tested” texts that previous batches of students have done well in.

IPS is preparing a fuller report on the issue, and will submit it next month to ministries including MOE and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

Associate Professor Poon believes it is important for young people to study literature, as it “encourages a deeper engagement not only with language but with issues of socio-political and cultural import”.

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