

IMBALANCE IN TOP SCHOOLS

The root of this imbalance has to be traced way back in the school system, where there is already the phenomenon of students from low-income families being under-represented in the top schools.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JASON TAN, from the National Institute of Education, who says the financial measures to help less well-off students are just one part of the equation.

With the bursaries, tuition fees for students in the 30th percentile household income bracket will be reduced to about \$5,000 to \$10,000, down from \$25,150 at the National University of Singapore and \$30,950 at Nanyang Technological University currently.



Ms Toh Ker Yin took a bank loan of more than \$100,000 to pay for medical school. She has since received a few bursaries that cover 60 to 70 per cent of tuition fees. She also works part-time as a retail assistant or beauty product promoter during the school holidays to help with expenses.
ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Most medical, dental students are from higher-income families

Rocky road to medical school

Enhanced bursaries will help the less well-off, but root of imbalance needs to be traced: Don

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Two-thirds of the undergraduates reading medicine and dentistry at Singapore's local universities

come from households earning more than \$9,000 a month, while the rest of their peers are from families earning below that level.

The data given by the Ministry of Education (MOE) largely mirrors trends in Britain and the United

States, where students from higher socio-economic groups dominate medical schools.

The ministry had announced last month that bursaries for medicine and dentistry courses would be significantly increased from next year to ensure they remain open to students from all backgrounds.

These courses, with tuition fees at around \$29,000 to more than \$34,000 a year, are the most ex-

pensive because of the higher costs involved in running the programmes, which include labs and facilities.

With the bursaries, tuition fees for students in the 30th percentile household income bracket will be reduced to about \$5,000 to \$10,000, down from \$25,150 at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and \$30,950 at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) currently.

The MOE had said previously that 11 per cent of both medicine and dentistry students come from families in the lowest 30 per cent income bracket, where the gross household income is \$4,000 and below a month.

In response to queries from *The Straits Times*, the ministry said another 20 per cent of students belong to the next 36 per cent of households by income, where gross household income per month is just above \$4,000 to \$9,000.

This means that about a third of the students come from families with a monthly household income below the median, which was \$9,293 last year.

Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said: "The enhanced bursaries... will encourage more students to apply to study medicine and will go a very long way in helping them achieve their dream of serving Singapore as doctors."

He said one in six of its students currently receives financial support from either the school, NUS or the Government.

"We will continue to raise funds for student bursaries to ensure that we can help as many students as we can," he added.

Overall, about a fifth of Singaporeans enrolled in these two courses across NUS and NTU have received financial aid over the past three years, said the MOE.

NUS has about 1,500 current stu-

dents in the medicine programme and 220 in dentistry, while NTU's medical school has about 530 students enrolled.

Associate Professor Jason Tan from the National Institute of Education said both medicine and dentistry come under scrutiny mainly because they are top courses with high fees.

The higher bursaries will be helpful for less well-off students, he said, but financial measures are just one part of the equation.

"The root of this imbalance has to be traced way back in the school system, where there is already the phenomenon of students from low-income families being under-represented in the top schools."

Amid concerns over social mobility and inequality, many observers have in recent years noted that diversity in some top schools has gone down.

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung last year acknowledged that these schools are attracting a greater proportion of students from families with higher socio-economic status.

"According to Singapore's meritocratic system, your home background shouldn't matter. What should matter is your own effort and hard work," said Prof Tan.

"Yet the aspirations you have, your parents and their networks, which school you go to and the influence of peers – all these matter."

But he noted that it would not be easy to determine an ideal "target" in terms of the proportion of students by income level.

The question, he said, is how to get students from lower-income homes to dream big.

"How do we get them to overcome some psychological barriers, aim higher and apply to the top courses and schools?" he added.

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Medical student Toh Ker Yin has had to overcome many hurdles to get to where she is today.

The 20-year-old, who is in her second year at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said that applying for medical school was a "leap of faith".

"I didn't think I had a very good chance because my results weren't perfect," said the Hwa Chong Institution and Bukit Panjang Government High School alumna, whose parents are retired.

She was inspired to become a doctor in her second year of junior college when her father fell ill and was diagnosed with multiple conditions.

"It was a difficult period for the family and it was in the same year as the A levels," Ms Toh recalled.

Her father had to stop work as a Grab driver and tensions ran high in the family over tight finances, medical bills and hospital appointments.

But with support from friends, she worked hard for the A levels.

"A conversation with a senior made me realise that studying was the only way to get out of my situation... so that my family wouldn't continue being unstable," said the youngest of three children, who took a bank loan of more than \$100,000 to pay for medical school.

She has since received a few bursaries that cover 60 to 70 per cent of tuition fees. She also works part-time as a retail assistant or beauty product promoter during the school holidays to help with expenses.

Ms Toh, who hopes to go into family medicine, said getting into medical school was a dream come true, but her parents were initially worried that cost would be a problem.

She has a close group of friends in medical school, some of whom are also on financial assistance like her.

"Once you get into medical school, whether you come from a neighbourhood school or have different backgrounds, it doesn't matter. It's really how hard you work to achieve what you want," she said.

Amelia Teng