

More alumni of local unis return to school, but barriers remain

Costs, work and family commitments among constraints faced: NUS survey

Gabrielle Chan

Constraints like costs, work and family commitments hinder alumni from returning for further studies, a survey by the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2023 found, although many of them are keen to keep learning.

More people have been returning to their alma mater for further studies over the past few years, with government support and more alumni engagement, said the universities, in response to queries from *The Straits Times*, although they declined to provide figures.

But more can be done, said experts and alumni, suggesting that there could be more flexible learning options to help working adults balance commitments, more curated and relevant courses, and greater employer support.

Survey results showed that younger alumni cite cost and work commitments, while those in their 40s mention family commitments as barriers, said Associate Professor Chai Kah Hin, associate provost (master's programmes and lifelong education) at NUS.

The 2023 survey, which involved more than 2,300 NUS alumni, was meant to better understand their needs and concerns regarding lifelong learning.

MORE SPECIALISED COURSES NEEDED

Mr Liu Yongsheng, 35, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in engineering in naval architecture from the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) in 2016, said he struggled to find a course that complemented his field of work.

"I deal with engineering issues related to marine, oil and gas, and often, the offerings are quite limited," said Mr Liu, adding that others may then turn to generic offerings like personal development or data analytics.

Mr Liu works as an assistant manager in naval architecture, and is currently attending process safety workshops offered by SIT – a series of modules which lead to a specialist certification.

Dr Samson Tan, director of the learning and professional development division at the Institute for Adult Learning, said adult learners are increasingly seeking out courses that are directly relevant to their industries and professions.

"Many adult learners in Singapore are still likely to go to an autonomous university and often prefer their alma mater to pursue further studies due to the flexible learning options, strong alumni networks, sense of community and industry relevance offered by these institutions," he said.

Apart from family support, Mr Liu, who is married with two chil-



Mr Liu Yongsheng with his parents at his commencement ceremony at the Singapore Institute of Technology in 2016. The assistant manager in naval architecture is attending process safety workshops offered by his alma mater. PHOTO: LIU YONGSHENG



NUS alumnus Lim Kaiheng (centre) with fellow graduates at his commencement ceremony in 2023. He pursued a master's in environmental management, and attended most classes in person after work. PHOTO: JASMINE YEONG



Mr Cai Yiqing and his wife, also an SMU alumnus, at their 2022 commencement ceremony. They both returned to school to pursue their master's. Mr Cai said he at first questioned whether the time and money spent on further studies would be worth it, but decided to go ahead to set a good example for his children, among other reasons. PHOTO: CAI YIQING

dren, said employers' support is also important.

He jumped at the opportunity when his company, Seatrium, offered its employees a chance to further their studies.

He returned to SIT to pursue a part-time Master of Engineering programme with a specialisation in mechanical engineering, which the company fully sponsored.

Likewise, with support from her company, 35-year-old Nurul Asyiken returned to her alma mater, Singapore Management University (SMU), to pursue a doctorate in engineering.

Ms Nurul, a senior data scientist, said she worked with her company to apply for a grant from the Industrial Postgraduate Programme (IPP), which saved both costs and time, as she was able to spend half of her week at work and the other half at school. The IPP, supported by the Economic Development

WHY ALMA MATERS MATTER

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DR SAMSON TAN, director of the learning and professional development division at the Institute for Adult Learning.

Board, helps develop graduate research talent by partnering locally based companies and universities.

"I might not have pursued the doctorate if I had no funding," she said.

NUS alumnus Lim Kaiheng, 34, who went back to pursue a Master of Environmental Management in 2023, said: "It is about having your workplace be supportive of the whole process, because there are trade-offs in terms of time."

The senior lead at Infrastructure Asia, a project facilitation office, said: "Most of the course happens outside of working hours, and my company was very supportive of us going to upgrade ourselves."

It was still challenging for Mr Lim, however, as he had to attend most classes physically after work. Though taxing, the experience was fulfilling, he said.

"If we don't step out of our day-to-day routine, we would never

meet certain groups of people."

IS IT WORTH IT?

Dr Tan said that returning to school often means less or loss of income during the period of study, which can be daunting for mid-career workers with financial responsibilities.

"Additionally, there is a concern about skill obsolescence... Mid-career workers may worry about falling behind in their careers while they are studying and fear that their existing skills will become obsolete."

He added that some adult learners may question the value of further education and whether it will enhance their career prospects.

SMU alumnus Cai Yiqing, 41, who graduated in 2007 and returned to pursue a Master of Science in Innovation in 2020, said he initially questioned whether the time and

money spent would be worth it.

Mr Cai, the founder of training company Lokotopia, said mid-career workers like himself often need to assess different options to see which would benefit their careers.

"They have many avenues to advance, like working harder to get a promotion, take a different role in a different country, or start their own business with friends," he said.

One reason for doing his master's was also to set a good example for his children, who were six and eight years old at the time. His wife, also an SMU alumnus, took on an executive Master of Business Administration course at the same time.

"If Daddy and Mummy could tackle something completely new at middle age, they could face whatever challenges they had in school," said Mr Cai, adding that there were some days when the whole family would be studying together.

SMU alumnus Jeanie Leong, 38, was also hesitant about studying again, having to consider her priorities as a newly-wed with a rigorous job.

Some people believe that the time and energy put into further education may yield better returns if they invested that same effort in their current job roles, said Ms Leong, the head of Asia-Pacific programme delivery at Barclays, who completed a master's in communication management in 2015 with SMU.

"I think the opportunity in this space lies in making clear how graduate studies can have a strong return on investment on one's career."

DRAWING MORE LEARNERS BACK

Universities have offered more subsidies and flexible learning options, like online or evening classes, to encourage more workers, including their own alumni, to learn new skills.

The Singapore University of Social Sciences has made its courses more relevant over the years and provided more ways to gain accreditation and certification, said its spokeswoman.

From April 1, SIT alumni can sign up for a free course or module once every five years, valued at up to \$3,500, said Mr Robin Ngan, director of SITLEARN, the university's lifelong learning division.

SIT also offers micro-credentials – shorter and more specialised qualifications – and learning pathways that consider individuals' goals, interests and learning styles.

NUS offers tuition fee rebates of 20 per cent for alumni and 10 per cent for other Singaporeans and permanent residents. This applies to more than 70 master's-by-coursework programmes.

Prof Chai said it has plans to work with companies to facilitate learning at work, and offer more flexible pathways for alumni with busy schedules.

More than 60 per cent of NUS alumni surveyed had participated in some form of continuing education in the past two years, said Prof Chai, and nearly 90 per cent planned to take up further studies in the next 12 months.

He said: "Their motivations tend to vary by age, although alumni of all ages agreed that the key motivation for lifelong learning was to gain knowledge and skills on subjects that interest them, and that are useful in their everyday life."

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