Tackling the manpower crunch in pre-schools

Tertiary institutes offering programmes for early childhood educators will raise intakes

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SINGAPORE – Tertiary institutes here offering training programmes for early childhood educators will be raising their intakes — a move pre-school operators felt would address the sector’s perennial manpower crunch, even though some wondered if the expansion would be sufficient to meet the industry’s expansion and demands.

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), which partners overseas universities to offer degree courses to polytechnic upgraders, said it will enrol up to 60 students under the joint SIT-Wheelock College programme, up from the current 42.

SIM University (UniSIM) is prepared to expand the intake of its Early Childhood Education with Management course by up to 20 per cent. Currently, annual enrolment at the university stands at about 80 pupils.

Having adequate faculty to teach students would be the challenge in raising intake, according to Dr Theresa Lu, who heads the early childhood education programme at UniSIM. The university is hoping to address this through collaboration with industry partners.

Singapore Polytechnic, which offers an advanced diploma for kindergarten teachers, plans to increase enrolment to 150 next year and 200 in 2015, up from its current annual intake of about 100 places. Both Ngee Ann and Temasek polytechnics said they are looking to open up more spaces in their diploma programmes but were unable to provide finalised figures.

There are more than 15,800 staff members currently employed in about 500 kindergartens and 1,000 childcare centres here, with the Government set to add about 20,000 more childcare places over the next four years.

The PAP Community Foundation (PCF), one of the largest pre-school players here, said it is prepared to give out more scholarships and create short stints for potential educators.

A PCF spokesperson said the surge in demand for teachers exceeds the supply of trained teachers currently, and increasing supply will help to alleviate manpower constraints. The PCF spokesperson, however, added that “pre-school teachers are people with a special temperament and aptitude — this naturally limits the field”.

“We are prepared to allow those keen to join the industry to experience or observe what a (pre-school) educator’s life is like through a short stint in our centres,” said the spokesperson.

The PCF is recruiting some 500 teachers this year and next year and will give out more scholarships to polytechnic students “if there is interest and demand”. It gives out 80 scholarships yearly.

Chief Executive of Modern Montessori International T Chandroo, who felt that expanding intakes at the tertiary institutes “will ease the pressure in the short run,” suggested that men be tapped to make up for the shortfall of teachers in the industry.

Dr Chandroo, who is also President of the Association of Early Childhood and Training Services, questioned pegging pre-school teachers’ salaries to that of allied educators in schools.

“All preschool teachers are required to undergo professional teachers’ training ... (they) should be accorded equal status with MOE primary and secondary teachers,” he added.

Director of Carpe Diem chain of childcare centres Rhonda Ng added that it is an “employee’s market” in the pre-school industry, citing how she has not been able to hire an English language teacher since last year.

The reduction in foreign manpower quota further compounds the problems, especially for the recruitment of Chinese language teachers, she said.

“We try to provide job flexibility to retain staff ... but there will be more centres coming up and I’m afraid the increase in intakes (at the tertiary institutes) will not be enough.”

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