

Thousands join scramble for places on vocational courses

Students whose grades were not good enough for publicly funded universities weigh alternatives

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About 20,000 students yesterday flocked for places at 10 schools run by the largest vocational education provider after learning their grades were not good enough to get them into a publicly funded university.

Gripping their Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) result sheets, they braved on-the-spot interviews when applying for diploma or privately funded degree programmes offered by the Vocational Training Council.

VTC deputy executive director Leung Yim-sing said there was no guarantee how many would be successful. The council had 17,000 vacancies across all programmes but more than half had already been allocated in conditional offers made to students.

"When demand for our courses peaked in 2015, we only had 1,000 places left to offer to these walk-in students. But competition has been less heated in recent years," Leung said.

The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority announced on Tuesday that 21,264 of 50,447 full-day school candi-

dates qualified for a limited number of places in publicly funded degree programmes. So at least 30,000 would be looking for alternative forms of higher education, such as diplomas, sub-degrees and privately funded degrees.

But the government has struggled to change the mindset that vocational training and competency-based programmes are inferior to academic ones.

A degree will benefit me more than an associate degree in terms of job seeking

STUDENT TSANG WAI-KWAN

A think tank's survey of more than 2,000 parents and students last September found that four in five did not recognise vocational education and training as a professional qualification.

Tsang Wai-kwan chose a degree in food safety offered by the VTC's Technological and

Higher Education Institute, over an associate degree in science by HKU Space, an affiliate of the University of Hong Kong.

"A degree will benefit me more than an associate degree in terms of job seeking and further studies," Tsang said.

The 18-year-old, who suffers from muscular atrophy, was also swayed by the non-meats tested subsidy of up to HK\$30,000 a year, as part of a scheme announced last year by Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor.

The programme could cost him HK\$96,360 a year depending on how many courses he takes.

Qurrat-ul-ain Faizan, 17, settled for an associate degree in English literature at HKU Space, despite previously considering it inferior to bachelor programmes.

"I will consider going to university after graduation because I want to get a proper degree to become a teacher," she said.

Gillian Li, 18, also chose HKU Space for an associate degree in nursing. "I will work hard to get into university," she said.

"A common value in our society is that you have to get a university degree to succeed," Chan Kam-yung, whose daughter applied for a higher diploma in visual arts at a VTC college, said society could change mindsets by not relying solely on certificates to judge young people.



Siem Yu-kai and Choi Yu-hong (right) among the students picking up their results. Photos: Nora Tam

HIGH MARKS OR LOW, THEY ARE ALL CHASING THEIR DREAMS

Stephanie Leung Tsz-kit, 18, Diocesan Girls' School
One of nine top scorers in the DSE exam this year, Leung said she was passionate about social affairs and had received a conditional offer from the University of Oxford majoring in political philosophy. She described her mother as her role model.

"My mum gives me freedom to go for whatever subject I'm interested in. It is because of her that I'm able to summon the courage to choose a less commonly selected major. I really wish I never forget why I chose politics in the first place during college time, and never just follow the crowd."

"My vision for Hong Kong is ... to become a more democratic and open society. While there are a group of students fighting for democracy, the suppression and control by the central government is also growing. So I am not sure where Hong Kong will end in the future."

Lu Wing-ze, 16, S.K.H. Holy Trinity Church Secondary School
Lu's grades were not good enough to qualify her for a publicly funded degree programme. So she applied for a higher diploma in visual arts offered by the Vocational Training Council to pursue her interest in the subject.

"My dream is to travel around the world with my family; we seldom travel abroad," she said.

Asif Kainaat, 19, Hong Kong Taoist Association The Yuen Yuen Institute No. 3 Secondary School
Asif hoped to get into the University of Hong Kong's nursing degree programme as she wanted to help ethnic minority people who might face language barriers in hospitals. "Sometimes, our people do not really get to know about what kind of problem they are facing," she

said. "My dream Hong Kong is one where everyone is equal, where there are more opportunities for ethnic minority groups in better jobs and where Chinese could view us in the same way as Chinese and speak to us in Cantonese."

Hussain Rajahmammad, 19, Hong Kong Weaving Mills Association Chu Shek Lun Secondary School
Hussain did not get stellar grades, but he had a clear goal. He accepted an offer for a diploma of foundation studies in hospitality at an affiliate unit of the University of Hong Kong, HKU Space. He planned to further his studies by doing an associate degree in early childhood education after graduation. "I like taking care of young children and I can easily make them quiet and play together," he said, adding that his dream was to be a kindergarten teacher.

Kenny Wong Ka-chun, 20, Hong Kong Christian Service Pui Oi School
Wong has Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a muscle degeneration disorder. He needs help for daily tasks, such as getting off his bed and showering, and has been living in a school dormitory as his mother, a single parent, is ill. Wong did not do well in the exam.

While he would qualify to receive over HK\$8,000 a year from the government if he pursued higher education, the school was trying to find more funding options for him. He was keen on higher diplomas offered by the VTC related to computers but wanted something offered at a school close to where he lived.

"These programmes are offered in Tuen Mun, therefore geographically these would be better options. I would not need to travel far to study these subjects."



Top scorers Stephanie Leung and Lam Yuet-ye (left), and Asif Kainaat. Photo: Dickson Lee