



Visual arts student Dean Phang (left) and literary arts student Tasneem Begum Mohd Mustapha (above), both 14, joined Sota despite having no formal arts training. ST PHOTOS: TIMOTHY DAVID

## Schools have ways to ensure fair admissions

Attempts by ambitious parents to game the Direct School Admissions (DSA) system are not limited to the School of the Arts (Sota).

There have been many reports of parents who sign their children up for "sports tuition" or coaching to enhance their chances of entering specialised independent schools.

On blogs and forums, parents also often share information about the interview and audition process.

The specialised independent schools here say they also have processes in place to detect a student's genuine aptitude.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS) High School of Mathematics and Science, students who pass initial selection tests are invited for a selection camp, where they are put through exercises that can shed light on their "problem-solving abilities, communication abilities and creativity", said NUS High principal Lee Bee Yann.

"The questions are original and tasks are structured such that it is hard to 'prepare' for them."

The School of Science and Technology, Singapore (SST) also holds a selection camp on top of a written test and portfolio submission.

National Institute of Education don Jason Tan said it is "commendable" that Sota is making an effort to address the issue of socio-economic inequalities which may limit the range of students who join such specialised schools. But a lot more work needs to be done, he added.

Primary schools, in particular, have an important role to play in identifying talent and encouraging pupils to apply for the specialised schools, especially those schools which have traditionally seen fewer pupils applying for the DSA scheme.

"If no one in your peer group has made it to the school, or if you have no parental encouragement or role models to emulate, you might not even take the first step of applying to the school," he added.

Yuen Sin

# Sota sees results in bid to widen its pool of students

It steps up outreach and improves screening to prevent gaming of admissions process

Yuen Sin

There has been a trend in recent years of well-off parents enrolling their children in arts enrichment classes to boost their chances of entering the School of the Arts (Sota).

But the school has been making a concerted effort to take in students from a wide background and has seen some results so far, said Sota principal Lim Geok Cheng.

Back in 2015, students from Sota came from a narrower pool of primary schools – just 41 per cent of all primary schools then. But this has now grown to 49 per cent out of the 190 primary schools here for this year's intake.

"We now have students who come from a wider mix of neighbourhoods, and not just the richer neighbourhoods," said Ms Lim, adding that the school hopes to continue to improve this figure, though it has not set a specific target.

In comparison, students at other specialised independent schools

here, including the Singapore Sports School and the School of Science and Technology, Singapore, come from around 30 to 40 per cent of all primary schools here.

Sota receives up to 1,000 applications every year, and admits about 200 in each intake. All of them are admitted through Direct School Admission (DSA), which can guarantee pupils with talent in the arts a place in the school even before the PSLE.

Since 2014, the school has been reaching out to primary schools and parents to address misconceptions about its admissions process. Its faculty have also made an extra effort to tease out the authenticity of students' portfolios and their motivations for joining the school.

Admissions staff have also been briefed to look out for students who have no formal training but display innate ability in an arts discipline. "We are very clear that we don't want to be elitist, or (fuel a perception) that the school is only for the rich," added Ms Lim.

To secure a place in the school, which offers the well-regarded International Baccalaureate (IB) programme, some parents try to game its admissions process – involving a

portfolio review, an audition and an interview – by shelling out big bucks for preparatory classes.

These classes, which promise to enhance a student's chances by providing coaching in arts disciplines and portfolio preparation, can cost nearly \$10,000 a year.

Sota distinguishes innate ability from hothoused talent through sections in auditions that require students to improvise on the spot and adapt to unknown scenarios using their creativity, said Ms Lim. "We try to discard (all elements) that have to do with money," she added.

For example, besides executing a rehearsed routine, an aspiring dance student may also be asked to perform on the spot to a piece of music he has never heard before, said Sota vice-principal Amy Khoo.

A student keen on specialising in the visual arts is not judged on how big or well-framed his portfolio is, but on his understanding of composition, proportion and space when given an unseen task.

It is often thought that a child has to be able to afford ballet, piano or violin lessons to be admitted, but the school does not always require formal arts training, added Ms Khoo. It has seen a fair share of stu-

dents who enter the music specialisation because they can sing, or through exposure to the arts in their school's co-curricular activity.

Figures on such students with no formal training, or those on financial assistance, are not available.

But students from households with a monthly gross income of under \$7,200 can receive a bursary that covers between 33 and 100 per cent of the school fees, which are between \$350 and \$450 a month.

Sota Year 2 student Tasneem Begum Mohd Mustapha, who is on the bursary scheme, applied to the school to study literary arts at the suggestion of her teacher, who noticed that she had a flair for writing. She was the only pupil from Telok Kurau Primary School who applied to Sota in her year.

In comparison, she noticed that some well-known primary schools, like convent schools, were over-represented when she joined Sota.

"There's a perception that students from neighbourhood schools can't do much, and many people think that you have to be the cream of the crop to apply for DSA. But it'll be nice to see more students from other schools at Sota, because the arts give you a different perspective on life," she said.

Her batch mate, 14-year-old visual arts student Dean Phang, also had no formal training when she applied to Sota as a pupil in Greenridge Primary School.

But she saw it as an advantage. "It allowed me to have a fresh perspective on certain art topics, and made me more determined to do better."

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A WIDER MIX

We now have students who come from a wider mix of neighbourhoods, and not just the richer neighbourhoods.



SOTA PRINCIPAL LIM GEOK CHENG

## Maldives MP fined \$12,000 for contempt of court

K.C. Vijayan  
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A Maldives company chairman and CEO, who is also a Member of Parliament in his country, was fined \$12,000 for contempt of court in failing to honour court dates here.

Ahmed Nashid of Maldives-based ADK Travels had first failed to com-

ply with a court order to show up in July 2015 to be examined about a US\$1.5 million (S\$2.04 million) debt.

The debt was owed on a loan given to ADK Travels in 2011 by investment company Fomento Associated Singapore Holdings for which Ahmed had acted as personal guarantor.

Following the default, Fomento sued Ahmed, ADK Travels and the

parent ADK Company, and obtained a High Court judgment in 2014. It then applied to examine Ahmed in court and determine any assets that could be called in to settle the debt.

But Ahmed failed to attend the July 8 hearing in 2015, which Mr Subramaniam Pillai from Colin Ng & Partners said showed that he had "every intention not to comply with

the court's order". He added that the hearing date to examine the Male-based businessman had to be adjourned several times because of the difficulties involved in serving on him the order to attend court.

A hearing for an application of contempt was set for July this year, but Ahmed, who is MP for the Komandoo constituency in Maldives, did not make it. However, he apolo-

gised to the court and explained that he was unable to attend because of parliamentary sessions and political meetings in Male. The hearing was adjourned to last Monday.

Rajah & Tann lawyer Jeremy Gan in Ahmed's defence urged the court to dismiss the move for contempt and instead issue a small fine or stern warning.

Judicial Commissioner Audrey Lim found Mr Ahmed guilty last Monday and held his breach of the court order was deliberate, but ruled that a fine would suffice after taking into account all factors.

The judicial commissioner noted that Ahmed showed up for the debt hearing on Nov 3, and last Monday was his second court appearance.

Ahmed, who gave assurance he would pay the fine by yesterday, was also ordered to pay costs, to be assessed.

The High Court "examination of judgment debtor" hearing will continue next month for Fomento's efforts to recover the six-year-old loan, which has since grown with interest to beyond US\$2 million.

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