Most medical, dental students are from higher-income families

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

Amelia Teng Education Correspondent

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 MOE had announced last month that bursaries for medicine and dentistry courses would be significantly increased 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 expensive 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 and $30,950 at Nanyang Technological University currently.

The MOE has 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 Yip 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 those two courses across NUS and NTU have received financial aid over the past three years, said he MOE.

NUS has about 1,600 current students in the medicine programme and 220 in dentistry, while NTU's has about 360 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.

"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 back in the school system, where there is already a concentration of students from low-income families being under-represented in the top schools."

Aid 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: "We are attracting a greater proportion of students from families with lower 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 matters."

But he noted that it would not be easy to determine an ideal target in terms of the proportion of students from lower-income homes.

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 asked.

amthal@nus.edu.sg