NSF cyber specialists can now attend classes at NUS

Mindef-NUS deal lets them pursue part-time studies while deployed in operational roles

Lester Wong

Full-time national servicemen (NSFs) under the work-learn Cyber NSF scheme will now be able to pursue their part-time tertiary studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS) after the school and the Ministry of Defence (Mindef) inked an agreement yesterday.

This follows a similar tie-up between Mindef and the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) in 2018, when the Cyber NSF scheme was launched.

That scheme was the first to enable NSFs to attend classes while being deployed in an operational role over a three- or four-year period.

This has seen four intakes of around 170 cyber specialists to date, with the pioneer batch graduating from the 35-week Cyber Specialist Cadet Course last August.

The specialists take on advanced cyber roles for Mindef and the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), such as in incident response and testing for security weaknesses in IT infrastructure and applications.

With the new agreement, NSFs will be able to earn academic credits by taking modules from the NUS School of Computing’s Information Security programme. The credits can be counted towards a cyber security degree.

They can expect to graduate from university at the same time as their peers from the same national service cohort, Mindef said.

Among the applicants for the scheme’s Cyber Specialist Award this year is Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) second-year student Teo Kai Xiang, 18.

Mr Teo’s interest in cyber security was sparked off by an incident in Secondary 1, when the private server he was playing Minecraft on was hacked, undoing his months of progress in the game.

Since then, he has taken part in around 30 online cyber security competitions, and was part of the winning four-man HCI team in the local Cyberthon competition earlier this month, beating out 55 other teams from various junior colleges.

Mr Teo said the Cyber NSF scheme represents an invaluable opportunity that very few other places can provide, as he can benefit simultaneously from the theoretical education in a university and the hands-on environment of the SAF.

“I don’t have much time to go into deep theory now, but that’s what I can go to NUS or SIT to learn,” he said. “I’ll also be able to apply my practical skills in a very real environment to deal with active threats – (something) that exams or schools cannot teach. Even competitions are a simulation that cannot be as realistic as dealing with such active threats.”

Interested pre-enlistees can apply at https://www.mindef.gov.sg/CyberNSF by June 30.

Applicants are expected to possess baseline knowledge and skills in cyber security, Mindef said, and will be put through a series of tests to assess their aptitude for problem solving and their skills in areas such as cryptography, security architecture and application security.

The SAF’s defence cyber chief, Brigadier-General Mark Tan, said: “Cyber security is a national imperative. We must recruit and train up a cyber force to defend and protect Singapore’s interests in the cyber domain.”

lesterw@sph.com.sg