

More social workers upgrade skills

Number who took courses at training institute up by 70%, likely spurred by need to prove their programmes have impact

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THE need for tangible proof that their programmes do indeed help clients appears to have sent more social service workers scurrying to improve their professional skills.

The number of those taking up courses at the Social Service Training Institute (SSTI) shot up to 6,320 in the past financial year – a jump of nearly 70 per cent.

Another 3,313 participants have signed up in the four months since then – a mere 400 short of the full-year intake in the financial year ending March 2006.

Last year, the SSTI provided more than 180 courses on issues ranging from how to deal with dementia or intellectual disabilities to broader ones that teach voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) how to manage themselves better. The institute is run by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS).

Its emphasis on tangible results – together with more funds and courses – could have caused the spike in numbers, said the council.

In recent years, the NCSS has encouraged

VWOs it funds to indicate specifically how their programmes help clients. For example, an organisation that trains the disabled to help them get jobs could show in its annual report how many of the disabled actually got jobs, said NCSS deputy chief executive officer Tina Hung.

“With this focus on outcome management, VWOs have increased efforts to build capability,” said Ms Hung. The courses, VWOs hope, will equip them with skills to help their clients better.

Most courses at the Ghim Moh institute are short term – ranging from a few hours to a week. The SSTI also provides certificate, diploma and degree courses, but take-up rates are lower. They range in duration from a few months to two years. Around 200 people took up such long-term courses last year.

Another catalyst for the recent spurt in numbers has been the easier availability of government training funds.

In March, Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan announced that his ministry would set aside \$45 million over the next five years to help charities and VWOs improve the skills of their workers.

The move came in the wake of scandals that shook public faith in the way charities manage themselves. The biggest involved the National Kidney Foundation, one of Singapore’s best-known charities.

The scandal could have led more social-service workers – particularly those in senior positions – to enrol themselves in courses aimed at improving the way VWOs manage their accounts and govern themselves. More than 500 took up such courses last year.

Students Care Service chairman Gopinath Menon, 62, recently attended one such course that taught him to “scrutinise” annual budgets to ensure every charity dollar is well spent.

“Most VWO board members are volunteers who have been put there because of trust,” said Mr Menon. “That trust should not be misplaced.” In the wake of the charity-sector scandals, he said, courses such as the one he attended would help him “catch things before they went wrong”.

But while governance is important, the vast majority of professionals who flock to the SSTI do so to improve skills pertaining to what they do.

Youth coordinator Han Shin Hui, 24, from the Young Women’s Christian Association, attended a week-long course to learn how to manage anger in youth and get the reticent ones to open up.

“Like many people in this sector, I am not professionally trained in social service,” she said, adding that she has a bachelor’s degree in real estate. “So for people like us, such courses are very useful indeed.”

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