

## Present company accepted

An exemption has given two ethnic minority students the chance to become social workers, writes Linda Yeung

Ansah Majeed Malik is taking it all in her stride as she juggles a full-time job with four classes per week, even with the prospect of hefty tuition fees in the years to come. Determination to gain a recognised social work qualification has kept her going. The 25-year-old Hongkonger of Pakistani origin has wanted to be a social worker since she landed a part-time job at a community centre in Tsuen Wan seven years ago.

She was thrilled to be accepted by Caritas Francis Hsu College for a pre-associate degree in social work last year and is now halfway through the two-year, part-time programme. The next step will be an associate degree in social work. This will qualify her for employment as a social work assistant.

Malik is one of the first two ethnic minority students to be admitted to any form of social work training in Hong Kong, despite the need for skilled professionals to work with ethnic minority communities in the city. Jeffrey Andrews, 25, a Hongkonger of Indian origin, is following the same programme. Both Malik and Andrews can speak but not write Chinese, despite attending classes in the language for years at designated secondary schools for ethnic minority students. Both are fluent English speakers.

The high level of Chinese-language proficiency required for entry to social work programmes has prevented ethnic minority youngsters from pursuing qualifications in the field.

But last year, Caritas Francis Hsu College introduced a new exemption for ethnic minority students from the Chinese-language requirement. It provided them with classes in basic Chinese supplemented by general education programmes instead. The two students leaped at the chance.

"I am very encouraged and happy to be able to apply what I have learned from the lectures. It is a very hard time for us having to study and work at the same time, but if you want to gain something, you have to lose something," says Malik, who is a community worker.

"My parents are very helpful with the tuition. They asked me to quit my job. At one time, I worked at a finance company to keep my education

going, but I quit after a while as I preferred to work in a community centre. The pay is low but it's a worthwhile job."

Andrews, who works full time at the Christian Action service centre for asylum seekers in Chungking Mansions in Tsim Sha Tsui, says he is passionate about helping others but has to work hard to prove himself. "I think I am good enough to be a social worker, but people put you down because you do not have the qualification," he says.

"There are also many situations where I do not know where the boundaries lie and I always try to push my limits to do more than I am supposed to do."

Malik and Andrews are potential role models for young people in their communities, many of whom have to take manual jobs because they lack qualifications. Both share a desire to serve the local community. "Hiring us to serve locals will show that Hong Kong is an international city. But if that does not happen, the needs of the ethnic minority community are vast," Andrews says.

The exemption was a victory for veteran ethnic minority rights campaigner Fermi Wong Wai-fun, who asked several community colleges and universities offering social work programmes to relax their Chinese-language requirements for ethnic minority applicants. Only Caritas responded positively. Advanced Chinese-language courses are mandatory on most sub-degree programmes.

"Caritas has set a good example. It's a matter of sensitivity to the needs of ethnic minority students here. Course assignments and handouts at the tertiary level are often in English anyway," says Wong, the founder of rights organisation Hong Kong Unison.

The more flexible approach to Chinese-language requirements and classes for ethnic minority students has won the support of the Social Workers' Registration Board.

This sets and monitors the standards of qualifications for registered social workers.

"It is too much to ask ethnic minority students to reach the same level as local students in their Chinese proficiency, and it will not be a problem for them to serve the ethnic minority community here. English is also an official language in Hong Kong," says board chairman Dr Hung Suet-lin, an assistant professor at Baptist University's social work department.

If Malik and Andrews can stay the course and complete a degree in social work, they will be able to apply for assistant social work officer posts in Hong Kong. But it could take up to six years if they study part time and competition for degree places is notoriously intense among sub-degree students.

Universities relaxed their Chinese-language requirements for undergraduate programmes in 2008 in a bid to help improve the very low access rates for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong.

Since then the number of such students gaining places at university per year has doubled - from 10 to 20 - but remains very small. Wong says the low admission rate is partially due to structural inadequacies in the education provided to ethnic minority students at public-sector

schools in Hong Kong.

"In designated schools for **ethnic minorities**, students of diverse abilities and backgrounds are grouped together in the same class and this makes effective teaching very difficult," Wong says.

"They are taught very simple Chinese and almost 90 per cent of them failed the former Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. The few who are accepted by mainstream government and aided schools lag significantly behind their peers and other students because of their poor grasp of Chinese. Ethnic minority students are getting inferior education and tend to be frustrated with their study."

Wong is fighting for better prospects for ethnic minority students on many fronts. She is already raising funds to set up ethnic minority scholarships for degrees in social work in an attempt to help students such as Malik and Andrews to fulfil their ambitions.

But she insists that the strengthening of Chinese-language teaching for second-language learners across both mainstream and designated schools is crucial for ethnic minority students to have better opportunities to progress further in higher education.

"There is also a need for training in cultural sensitivity and teaching Chinese as a second language for schoolteachers," Wong says.

"It is important to create a racially harmonious learning environment." [familypost@scmp.com](mailto:familypost@scmp.com)

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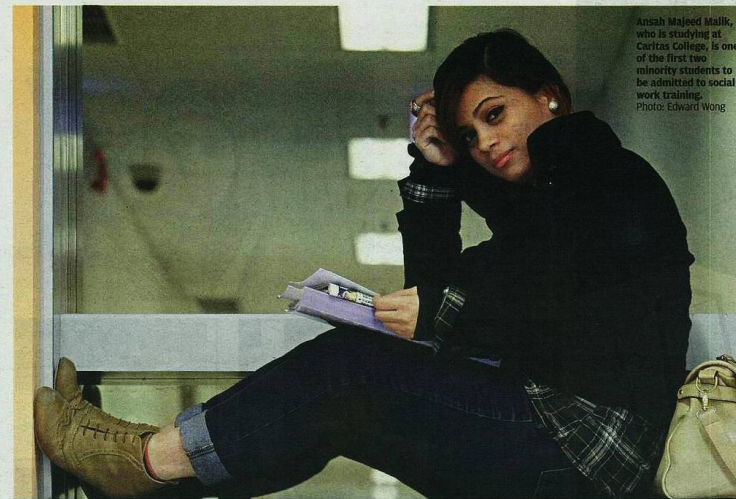
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From left: students Jeffrey Andrews and Anshah Majeed Malik, and executive director of Hong Kong Unison Femi Wong. Photo: Edward Wong



Anshah Majeed Malik, who is studying at Caritas College, is one of the first two minority students to be admitted to social work training. Photo: Edward Wong

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**Ethnic minority students should not have to reach the same level of Chinese proficiency as locals**

DR HUNG SUET-LIN, BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

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