

When hikes don't matter

'Quality' is priority, say S'poreans unperturbed by universities' fee increases

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GREATER competition does not necessarily result in lower prices – certainly not in tertiary education, as the latest university fee hikes bear out. Still, Singaporeans, it seems, are willing to fork out the dough for quality education.

Two years after the Government granted autonomy to the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) to join the Singapore Management University (SMU) in setting their own fees, a sharper price differentiation between rival courses is emerging, even before the fourth publicly-funded university enters the fray.

On Wednesday, the NUS, NTU and SMU announced tuition fee increases between 4 and 20 per cent for the new batch of undergraduates entering in August, citing the need to pay for top international faculty.

With the latest round of hikes, an undergraduate degree from the NUS Business School would each year cost about 3 per cent more than NTU's rival offering.

Likewise, students would have to fork out more for the NUS law school as compared to other NUS faculties. The 20-per-cent increase in the law school's tuition fees – now \$7,340 a year – narrows the gap on what law undergraduates have to pay at the one-year-old SMU law school, although the latter also increased its annual tuition fees by \$1,050 to \$10,050.

But even with the greater price differences, parents and students whom TODAY spoke to said they placed greater premium on the quality of education.

Ms Kerry Kong, 19, who plans to enrol in the NUS law school, said the fee hike "won't affect my choice as I believe that NUS can provide a quality education".

And despite the weakening of the US dollar, which makes the prospect of an American tertiary education relatively cheaper, it would take a heftier increase to sway parents and students away from universities here.

After the increases, annual tuition fees for majority

of the courses here would cost between \$6,360 and \$10,050. In comparison, annual tuition fees for American universities such as Arizona State University and University of South California cost between US\$8,000 (\$11,300) and US\$22,000. Ivy League universities charge around US\$30,000 each year.

Mr Chia Kew San, a 49-year-old pastor whose daughter is entering university next year, feels that Singapore universities are "good enough", but felt that an annual tuition fee of "over \$9,000 and \$10,000 for local universities would be too much". Said Mr Chia: "Unless it is the Ivy League universities, I would not consider sending my daughter to the US as I support local education."

NTU's Assistant Professor Mark Cenite, assistant chair of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, pointed out that Singapore universities are "still a bargain by international standards, especially given the high quality of education".

While the NTU declined to reveal the salaries of its top-earning faculty, it cited the likes of NTU Provost Professor Bertil Andersson and Nanyang

Business School dean Professor Jitendra Singh as examples of prized catches in academia.

When contacted, all three universities felt that the fee increases would have little bearing on the level of competition – both within and without Singapore.

Professor Kulwant Singh, interim dean of NUS Business School, believes that parents and students "look primarily at the quality of education" rather than "price". He added: "The very large number of foreign applicants we receive – we only admit a small proportion – indicates that they recognise the excellence of our education."

Pointing to the smaller class sizes and "interactive, seminar-style pedagogy which SMU is well-known for", SMU law dean Professor Michael Furmston said: "In addition to hiring a strong cadre of top law faculty from around the world, the university is also able to extend, to the law programme, the top minds and expertise of its large pool of business and finance professors." — ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JINNY KOH AND NG JING YNG

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— Assistant Professor Mark Cenite of NTU