

Universities in scholarship war

Students spoilt for choice as varsities offer bonanza of perks

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THE bonanza of grants and bursaries in the Government's latest Budget may ensure that most Singaporean can afford a tertiary education, but for their part, local universities have more and more been dangling a no-strings lure of their own – bond-free scholarships – to hook the very best and brightest.

Take straight-As student Jo Tay. She had her pick of schools here and overseas, but the former was initially not a consideration at all. Her mind was set on studying in Japan on a scholarship from one of the many corporations and government agencies that had scouted aggressively at her junior college.

"But then I got disillusioned by the idea of a bonded scholarship, because I wasn't ready to commit to a career or company yet," said Ms Tay, 20.

And so, when she was offered a bond-free scholarship by Singapore Management University (SMU), she took the local route after all. "I liked the culture of the school, and it was an attractive scholarship that suited my needs. I like the freedom to choose what to do with my life after I graduate," said the SMU Lee Kong Chian scholar now pursuing a double degree in law and business.

Such local university scholarships – bond-free and dangling perks such as sponsorship for overseas exchange stints – are growing in popularity with local students.

With tuition fee hikes, deepening competition between the three public-funded universities – not to forget a fourth soon to join

the fray – and plans to grow the number of subsidised university places per cohort to 30 per cent by 2015, these scholarships are a vital talent-bait.

Case in point: Scholarship portal BrightSparks has observed a "shift" in students going for university scholarships, as opposed to ones offered by the private sector and public agencies like the Public Service Commission.

Indeed, the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), National University of Singapore (NUS) and SMU all made BrightSparks' list of Top 20 scholarship providers in Singapore last year, as voted by junior college students, according to Mr Lim Der Shing, director of Jobsfactory which manages Brightsparks.

At SMU, all scholarships offered and administered by the university are bond-free. Individuals and private organisations sponsor some, while others are funded by the SMU faculty, staff and generous alumni.

Dean of students Low Aik Meng felt it was the trend for scholarships to go bond-free. "Our scholarship sponsors believe in the over-arching objective of supporting young talents and contributing to the economy as part of nation-building," he said.

About 1,500 students applied for 300 scholarship places at SMU last year, up from 1,330 applications for 240 places in 2006.

But there are other bases of attraction too, for scholars. NUS Global Merit scholar Magdalene Lie, 20, told TODAY: "The scholarship includes sponsorship for an overseas exchange programme, so I get the best of both worlds – studying at NUS Law Faculty while still having the experience of studying overseas."

NUS introduced its prestigious Global Merit Scholarship in 2005, and has also

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upped the number of scholarships it gives out. Three years ago, there were 70 scholarships holders at the university – by last year, the figure had more than doubled to 170.

The university has set a target of giving out 300 scholarships every year. “By 2010, we hope to have awarded scholarships to about 1,200 students, about 5 per cent of the total student population,” said NUS provost and deputy president (academic affairs) Tan Eng Chye.

And for sure, the demand is there – from just 125 three years ago, the number of applications rocketed to 1,300 in 2007. But Prof Tan stressed, the number of scholarships given out would be kept small to maintain the prestige level. “If a student can say he was one of 10 students who secured a certain scholarship, rather than one of hundreds, it makes a difference.”

NTU, while conceding that scholarships were an important admissions tool, emphasised that upping the number of scholarships awarded was not a goal in itself.

“It defeats the purpose to meet a

number. It should always be about the quality,” said NTU dean of admissions and financial aid Loh Nee Lam.

He also did not think scholarships were the “selling point” of a university. “It’s about the experience we can give them, the courses, the quality of the professors.”

NTU has opted, rather, to make adjustments to its prestigious Nanyang Scholarship – set up in 1997 – in keeping with students’ demands and needs. For instance, it added leadership-training modules in response to scholars’ feedback.

NUS’ Prof Tan pointed out that scholarships also play a role in strengthening alumni ties. “There is sort of a natural attachment to the school ... you would feel indebted,” he said. This is significant given the growing importance of alumni in helping to fund university initiatives.

One scholar who feels the ties to her alma mater is Ms Lindy Han, 22, a Nanyang scholar, who has appeared in NTU advertisements in the newspapers endorsing the scholarships. “I am appreciative of NTU awarding me the scholarship, and it would be a pleasure to support them,” she said.

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– Nanyang scholar Linda Han