Disabled students win scholarships for doing well in school

BY ARLINA ARSHAD

WHEN his friends are out watching movies or partying, 20-year-old undergraduate Liew Chong Heng is at home copying lecture notes.

The Singapore Management University student suffers from muscular spinal atrophy, and his muscles — including those in his fingers — are weak and wasting away. So he has to spend more time than his peers writing or typing his notes. But that has not prevented the second-year Information Systems student from performing in his exams. Last year, he scored three As, a B and a C for his term papers.

And in his A levels in 2003, he scored an A and two Bs.

Last week, Mr Liew, whose legs are paralysed, received an $11,000 scholarship from the Society for the Physically Disabled and Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation.

The other recipient, Mr Jan Lee, 24, is also paralysed in both legs. He will start reading for an accounting degree at Nanyang Technological University next month.

This is the second year the scholarships are being given out to recognise students with physical disabilities who do well in school. Last year, three were awarded.

The chairman of the foundation’s executive committee, Mr Koh Poh Tiong, said that the five who applied for the scholarships this year were of “extremely high calibre”. But Mr Lee and Mr Liew impressed the selection panel with their “confidence and youthful optimism”.

“Besides their excellent academic results, two strengths that are strikingly apparent in them are their perseverance and burning desire to succeed.”

The two men told The Straits Times it takes a lot of determination to compete alongside their able-bodied peers. What is a minor discomfort to others is a huge hurdle to them.

Mr Liew said: “My fingers become numb when it gets cold in the lecture theatre. It slows down my writing.”

He sleeps just two to three hours a night, to keep up with his studies.

Mr Lee, who graduated with an accountancy diploma from Ngee Ann Polytechnic, struggles to get to class when it rains.

He said: “I’d be late for lessons or have to skip them altogether then, as the slopes on campus became slippery and it makes it difficult to negotiate them in my wheelchair.”

If not for the support they receive from their family, friends and schools, said the men, they would not be where they are now.

Mr Lee said he is particularly grateful to his polytechnic’s marketing research and statistics lecturer, Mr Jonas Lee, who persuaded the poly to build a lift that allows him to get to the library.

The 40-year-old lecturer brushed aside the praise, saying: “I’ve always believed in equal opportunity for everyone, disabled or able, and providing the right environment for them to study in is just one aspect.”