SINGAPORE: Some 300 students and teachers had a chance to develop and debate over their own budget on Friday, before the actual one next Friday.

The session was organised by the Finance Ministry and Singapore Management University.

The students from various JCs and universities took notes diligently, and paid close attention to what a Finance Ministry official had to say about the budget's objectives.

Soon, they were planning where and how the country should spend their money.

Many focused on issues like increasing spending for education and increasing taxes for tobacco and alcohol.

One student said, "This experience has opened up my ideas of how (the) budget is important to our country and that even youngsters like us, we should know what's happening."

Another commented, "As students in the future, we need to make the right decisions for our future, for our future generations."

A third added, "It's a great opportunity for everyone to come and see what the budget is, take some ownership of it and because the budget affects everybody, we're the ones who should be concerned about it."

Han Kok Juan, Director, Social Programmes, Finance Ministry, said, "As future leaders for the country, it's important they understand the budget is not just about tackling short-term issues, but it's about addressing long-term challenges and creating long-term advantages for Singapore."

This is the first time the Finance Ministry has organised such a big group of students and teachers to design and debate their own budget.

They were also given an insight on what to look out for when preparing for the country's budget.

Hopefully they will learn that this is no easy task, something the students agree with as they defended their spending and answered questions on priority areas.

The Ministry's Budget 2006 website has also attracted more than 40,000 hits since it was launched on January 20.

This is double the number seen last year. - CNA/ms