NUS and NTU reviewing policy on fee hikes

They may either follow SMU model or disclose future increases at time of admission

By Sandra Davie & Lynn Kan

A DAY after students protested against a fee hike, the National University of Singapore (NUS) said it is considering locking in fees for the duration of students' studies or disclosing exact increases at the time of admission.

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) said that it was also considering similar changes to its fee policy.

The universities said yesterday they are looking at two models. The first is the Singapore Management University (SMU) scheme in which a student is charged the same annual fee for each of his four years of study.

Alternatively, the universities will tell students ahead of enrolment, exactly how much their fees will go up by, year on year.

NUS provost Tan Chorh Chuan said his dons are looking into fee lock-in schemes, following the unhappiness expressed by students regarding the 3 per cent fee hike.

On Tuesday, NUS and NTU announced that their students, except for those in medicine and dentistry, will pay an extra $180 a year.

One day later, SMU announced a 15 per cent fee hike — but it actually translates to about 5 per cent a year over the duration of the course because of its unique lock-in scheme.

There was muted reaction to the fee hike from NTU and SMU students. But at NUS, some students wore black on Thursday to show their unhappiness at the increase, which some felt came too soon after last year's 5 per cent hike.

Second-year arts student Charlene Ang, 19, said: "It is not so much the 3 per cent this year. I worry about next year and the year after, when my sister will also enter the university."

Prof Tan said: "Student leaders met said some of the unhappiness stems from not being told of the increases ahead of time."

"With the lock-in scheme, parents can plan ahead and set aside a specific amount for their children's education."

Prof Tan said students were also confusing the money the university receives from the Government for its day-to-day running, with the capital development funds used for building projects.

Some had questioned the university's decision to construct a new administration building.

Explained Prof Tan: "They are two quite separate funds. The money given for building projects cannot be used for teaching purposes."

He said fee hike was necessary to cover the rising costs of running a university, adding that NUS and NTU increased their fees last year after a three-year freeze.

Meanwhile their operating costs — 70 per cent of which are for faculty salaries — have risen further.

NUS has to pay internationally competitive salaries to retain and recruit quality academic staff, he said.

In a letter to The Straits Times' Forum page, Prof Tan said "in addition, a significant part of the supplies and services needed to maintain quality programmes, like library books and laboratory materials, has to be sourced from overseas, generally with year-on-year cost increases that are higher than domestic inflation."

"We have also significantly enhanced student and teaching facilities in recent years. Libraries, lecture theatres and seminar rooms across the campus as well as IT infrastructure have been upgraded."

"We will ensure that no student we admit is denied an NUS education for financial reasons."

Students interviewed welcomed a lock-in scheme.

Ms Ang, whose widowed mother is the family breadwinner, said: "If I know ahead of time, then I can take on a part-time job to earn enough money for myself and maybe my sister."

sandra@sph.com.sg
lynnkan@sph.com.sg

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