



DOING THEIR PART to save the Earth by pushing for recycling are (from left) Suganya Balasundaram, Choy Sing Ying, Surya Dharma, Le Duc Phuong, Nguyen Tho Thao Duyen and Aditi Gupta.

PHOTO: WANG HUI FEN

From recycling to helping disaster victims and fighting fee hikes, S'pore students show their mettle

► Jean Loo

THE National University of Singapore (NUS) used to have just 20 recycling bins for paper, plastic and cans. Now it has more than 120 dotted around the campus.

Over at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), students raised \$160,000 for the victims of the Boxing Day tsunami in less than a month.

And when the Singapore Management University (SMU) raised fees by 15 per cent, it decided to "lock in" its fees, ensuring that students will pay the same fees during their years there, even if there are fee increases for later intakes.

Who made these happen? Student activists.

Contrary to the myth that Singaporean youth are too busy to care about social issues, many are campaigning for causes they believe in and effecting real change.

Activism on campus came under the spotlight two weeks ago when an NTU undergraduate sent an e-mail message to 8,000 university mates, asking them to get together and "fight for their rights" against "low quality education".

Second-year engineering student Gary Goh complained about lecturers who speak broken or heavily accented English. His campaign sparked lively discussion in The Straits Times and online forums.

The heyday of student activism was in the 1960s when Chinese students were often involved in communist-instigated riots. For example, the Hock Lee Bus Riots, which broke out when Chinese student leaders and bus drivers protested against the exploitation of workers, left four people dead and 31 injured in clashes with the police.

While fiery speeches and clashes with the Government have died down, students still do campaign to get themselves heard.

Take Students Against the Violation of the Earth (Save), an NUS group founded 12 years ago by environmentalist lawyer Daren Shiau when he was a student at NUS.

It launched a campaign to promote the use of recycling bins this year, spreading the message via e-mail, banners and posters, and conducted a survey to gauge pub-



lic awareness about recycling bins.

The members even stood beside recycling bins to demonstrate to students how to use them correctly. Save's president, civil engineering student Surya Darma, 23, said: "It's our philosophy to embark on projects that are continuous, such as bringing recycling bins to students to encourage recycling."

He said the school administration thought that adding more bins would not be financially sustainable as people were not using them the right way. But the group's constant campaigning eventually persuaded them otherwise.

At NTU, more than 100 students manned booths last year to collect donations for tsunami victims, raising \$110,000 in cash and \$50,000 in kind.

Final-year business student Elisha Teo, 24, then acting president of the Red Cross Humanitarian Network (NTU Chapter), which organised the drive, said: "The overwhelming response showed that most people just needed to be awakened to the fact that the world does not revolve around them."

Similarly, the SMU Students' Association launched the Blue Ribbon Campaign to champion student welfare following the university's announcement last year that fees would rise by 15 per cent.

It polled 1,500 students on how the hike could be better managed and asked for it to be staggered. That culminated in the university agreeing to lock in the fees.

Association president Timothy Tio, 24, said: "The success illustrated the close ties between the management and student body. We realise that with the open-door policy adopted by the school, there is rarely a need to adopt a confrontational approach."

But there were also campaigns that just fizzled out.

Take the attempt two months ago by NUS science student Alex Ang, 24, to protest against the university's 3 per cent fee hike. He urged his peers on an online forum set up by the NUS Students' Union to show their displeasure by wearing black shirts and tops to campus. However, the plan flopped due to lack of organisation.

Science student Tan Shi Hui, 22,

was sceptical about the plan and did not take part. "I didn't think that anyone would be interested in protesting. After all, what difference would it make?" she said.

A student leader, who declined to be named, said he had pushed for a more transparent grading system in his university. But it was like coming up against a brick wall. The students were apathetic and the administrative system unresponsive, he said.

Political observers say this is not surprising in a pragmatic place like Singapore. Assistant professor Kenneth Tan at the NUS department of Political Science said the lack of enthusiasm and participation was probably because the students' mindset is: wait for someone else to take the first step.

He said: "Any benefits that result from other students' efforts would be shared by all, so if every student acted this way, collective action is unlikely to happen."

Writer Catherine Lim finds it troubling that students are either indifferent towards policies laid out for them or are afraid of being blacklisted if they speak out.

"A little bit of mess and noise is necessary for democratic health, even in a school setting. Students must learn to speak their mind with respect and sincerity," she said.

Which is exactly what NTU communication studies student Teng Kie Zin, 22, hopes he is doing. He started a petition with his friends against the fee hike two months ago and the way it was communicated to them. So far, only 250 people have signed up.

But he is not discouraged. He said: "We see ourselves as catalysts for change."

"Besides, student activism adds vibrancy to the school culture and helps us feel a sense of belonging towards our school."

To SMU business student Kishoore Jehan, 23, the challenge is to come up with unique ways of fundraising to convince her peers to donate.

She has spearheaded several socio entrepreneurship projects to raise \$8,000 to buy two containers to be used as classrooms for children affected by the earthquakes in Iran last year.

She said: "It takes a lot of courage, determination and the right mindset to see the project through, but my friends and I were addicted to helping these children and furthering a cause we believe in."

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