FOR the first time, all needy undergraduates who applied for bursaries have been granted funds to study at university — despite a threefold jump in applicants.

Singapore’s three universities — the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University — have offered about 2,500 bursaries worth $4.2 million.

This is in marked contrast to last year, when fewer than half the applicants at NUS and a fifth of those at NTU received bursaries, resulting in a flood of complaints.

NUS, especially, came under fire when it appealed for alumni donations. It responded by pledging to up the donations it received with its own money to provide help for all needy students.

NUS and NTU were able to meet all requests this year as they set aside more money for bursaries and stepped up fund-raising to fulfill their promise that no student would be denied an education because of financial circumstances.

The bursaries — covering one year of study — range from $1,000 to $2,000 each for NUS students, and from $600 to $3,000 for NTU. SMU’s bursaries range from $750 to $2,000.

Students have to meet stringent income criteria to qualify for bursaries. At NUS, for example, funds are available only to undergraduates with a gross monthly per capita household income of up to $900.

Bursaries are the only “free” form of financial help available to students in need. There are several loan schemes to help students cover tuition fees, buy a laptop or even attend overseas exchange programmes. Generally, they are interest-free until the students graduate.

At NUS, about 1,500 students have been granted bursaries worth $2.2 million in total by the university, while another 322 received the new Education Ministry (MOE) bursaries worth $800 each.

Last year, only 492 out of 1,074 NUS students who applied for bursaries received funds.

NTU reports a similar trend. This year, close to 1,000 of its students received university bursaries and another 311 obtained the MOE grants.

Last year, only 201 students, or 18 per cent of those who applied, were given help.

The Singapore Management University too offers bursaries, but there are only about 100 takers. Its students prefer to vie for the scholarships or take up part-time jobs on campus to pay for tuition.

This year NTU will fork out $2 million in bursaries — almost five times the $464,000 it spent last year.

Said NTU admissions dean and the head of its financial aid office, Associate Professor Loh Nee Lam: “NTU set aside funds and went all out to raise money to help more needy students. It is important to deliver on our promise of providing for needy students.”

NUS registrar Ang Siaw Gek said NUS was committed to providing bursaries for all eligible applicants every year.

The financial aid officers at NUS and NTU say more needy students are seeking help in light of rising fees, which went up by 5 per cent last year and another 3 per cent this year.

One of them was NUS arts undergraduate Donald Lim, 22, who works up to 20 hours a week in two different jobs.

He said: “If not for the bursary money I would have to work even more hours and my studies would suffer.”

Mr Lim lives with his father and salesman brother, who is the family breadwinner.

Mr V. Rajan, 48, a technician who has to support four children, including his university-going son, said: “When my son got into university, instead of being happy, I was sad, because I thought there was no way I could send him. Luckily, with the loans and bursary, he will be able to manage.”

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