Mixed views on impact of foreign students’ fee hike

Industry players don’t expect adverse effect but overseas students here think otherwise

BY LIAW WY-CIN

UNIVERSITIES and agents do not expect the hike in fees for foreign students to dent Singapore’s plans to double the number of foreign students here within the next six years — but many such students are not so sure.

One reason for industry players’ optimism is that revenue from foreign students in private institutions forms the largest slice of the education pie and that is growing at the fastest pace.

And for these students, there is no change in fees as they already pay full fees in these institutions.

The Government’s latest policy of putting Singaporeans first affects only publicly funded institutions, where fees are subsidised by the Government.

However, most foreign students The Straits Times spoke to said the increase from $6,720 to $9,170 a year in university fees would make many of them seriously reconsider Singapore as an education destination.

From 2008, new foreign students entering university here will have to pay 50 per cent higher fees than Singaporean students. Those with permanent residency (PR) status will pay 10 per cent more than citizens.

For foreign students without PR status, for example, this translates to an increase of about $2,400 a year.

Currently, foreign university students pay 10 per cent more than Singaporean students, who pay the same as those with PR status. Existing foreign students, including those with PR, are not affected by the hike.

Overseas students believe their universities may think twice about getting a degree in Singapore with the latest fee increase.

Said Indonesian Wendi Budianto, 19, who is in his final year at Singapore Polytechnic: “Many of them may decide to go to China, where it is cheaper, or they may go to the US or the UK.

“With the higher fees they have to pay here, they may feel that they get a better deal in Western countries. They may have to pay even higher fees there, but at least that comes with that added prestige factor.”

Vietnamese Singapore Management University (SMU) undergraduate Hoang Ngoc Yen, 21, a second-year accountancy student, said many Vietnamese would find the new fees too expensive and may opt to study at international universities in Vietnam instead.

But those in the education sector believe Singapore will still reach its target of drawing 150,000 foreign students here by 2012.

Mr Gregory Lye, who runs Education Unlimited Singapore, an agency that brings in foreign students, said: “Many foreigners still see Singapore as a place for quality education. They will still come, but with the increase in fees, they will also expect an improvement in the quality of education delivered.”

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pledged to “treat visitors well, but citizens better”. And cuts to health subsidies for foreigners were announced last week.

About half the 70,000 foreign students in Singapore are enrolled in publicly funded institutions and the other half in private ones, which is the sector seeing the biggest growth.

Foreign students make up about 9,000 of the 43,700 undergraduates enrolled in universities here. Many, especially those from the region, are on scholarships, so the increase in fees is unlikely to affect them.

One of them is second-year SMU economics undergraduate Kyaw Kyaw Win, 22, from Myanmar, who believes many people from his country will still be drawn to Singapore.

He said: “Singapore is still much cheaper than Western countries and the education system is comparable to that in the West. The universities here also have many financial schemes to help students out.”

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