For freedom, some foreign students will pay full fees

BY LIAW WY-CIN

POLYTECHNIC student Bobby Wibawa, has to pay only about $2,300 a year for his three-year business IT course at Temasek Polytechnic.

But the 20-year-old Indonesian opted to pay full fees of about $12,000 a year instead.

All because he does not want to be tied down to working in Singapore for three years.

There are no official figures on how many foreign students choose to pay full fees, but the numbers are believed to be small.

Tertiary education at the publicly funded polytechnics and universities here is heavily subsidised by the Government, for both local and foreign students.

But for foreign students, even those with permanent resident status, there is a three-year bond – they have to work in Singapore during this period. They can work overseas, but only for a company that has its base in Singapore.

There are about 720 foreign students studying in the polytechnics and universities here who are not on the government subsidy scheme. They form about 5 per cent of the 15,700 foreign students studying at these institutions.

The Education Ministry says most of these 720 students are on scholarships, either from their home country or other organisations.

But some, like Mr Wibawa, are willing to pay out of their own pockets so they do not have to commit to working in Singapore for three years – a long time to stay in one place for many young job seekers today.

Said Mr Wibawa: "I want the flexibility to move around. Even if I were to work in Singapore, it will just be for the experience and not for the long term."

Full fees at the polytechnics are about $12,000 a year for three-year courses. Those at the universities can run to about $21,000 to $23,000 a year for three- or four-year undergraduate courses. Courses in music, medicine and dentistry cost two to four times more.

The Government subsidises each student about $10,000 a year for polytechnic courses and $14,000 to $16,000 a year for most university courses.

Students who take up this subsidy pay about $2,000 a year for polytechnic courses and $7,000 a year for university ones.

But they will have to pay more from next year.

The Government announced last month that fees for foreign students in publicly funded institutions, including schools, junior colleges and the Institute of Technical Education, will be increased.

This is to better differentiate the perks for locals and foreigners, so Singaporeans take precedence.

Most foreign students who opt to pay full fees tend to be Indonesian Chinese, whose parents are businessmen who can afford the hefty fees.

Some of those who opt to take up the Government’s financial help are quite happy to work in Singapore. Others bemoan potential lost opportunities should overseas job offers come their way.

Said Singapore Management University second-year accounting student, Sameer Goyal, 19, from India, who took up the subsidy: "It will be good to work in Singapore because after Hong Kong, it’s the next key financial centre."

"But if the chance comes for me to work overseas, I may consider paying off the bond."