WHICH UNIVERSITY?

For years now, students have been able to apply to all three local universities, and choose where to go once acceptances come in. So the universities strive to be different — in their programmes, admission criteria and fees. The Straits Times Education Correspondent Sandra Davie takes a look at the choices offered by the universities.

Degrees

THERE are the local single degree, of course. A few years ago, double degrees were all the rage. Now it is the local degree that matters. These are proving popular as more companies look for employees with a global outlook.

NUS: It offers the widest range of degrees among the three universities. Its exclusive courses are medicine, architecture, dentistry, music, pharmacy, nursing and project and facilities management.

Global degrees:

- Bachelor of Arts (Honours) with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Bachelor of Computing (Computer & Media) with Carnegie Mellon University.
- Bachelor of Engineering (Civil Engineering) with the University of Melbourne.

NTU: It expanded its range of courses in recent years to include social sciences and the arts. It offers majors in computer science, engineering, communication studies, management and economics (under the National Institute of Education).

Global degrees:

- Double degree in Biological Sciences and Biotechnology (Tongji Medical College) with Beijing University of Chemical Medicine.
- Double MBA degree programmes in Management and Technology with Japan’s Waseda University.
- Bachelor of Engineering (Computer Science) from NTU and Master of Science (Computer Science) from Georgia Institute of Technology.

SMU: Being itself a boutique business university, it offers four-year, full-time programmes in business, economics, information systems management and social science. It has a high graduate rate, with 90% of students finding work.

Global degrees:

- Integrated Science (Information Systems) and management degree from SMU and management science from Cambridge University.

Fees

These universities announced in January that they will not raise tuition fees this year in view of the upcoming increase in grants and services fees (GSF). The hikes in fees will cover the deficit and for some units, it will not be raised in the fiscal year. Even fees are increased for later intake.

Some parents and students prefer this lock in whereby, because it allows them to plan ahead and set aside a specific amount of money.

Both NUS and NTU have said they are considering a similar scheme.

NUS ANNUAL FEES

- Dentistry and medicine: $17,520
- Medicine: $14,590
- Nursing: $7,600
- All others: $11,110

NTU ANNUAL FEES

- $6,310

SMU ANNUAL FEES

- $7,500 (except law which is $9,000).

Students and faculty

A UNIVERSITY may have the latest equipment and top-class buildings, but the quality of its faculty and student body is what sets it apart from the competition. A university which school to choose, study the student mix, asking questions such as how many graduates are employed, and what is the quality of the teaching, and the percentage of foreign students.

More often, the more diverse the student body, the richer learning experience. Parents will want to look at how many places were offered last year to diploma holders. As for the faculty, many universities

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Students get more chances to go abroad

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were granted bursaries worth $2.2 million in total by the university, while another 322 received the MOE bursaries.

NTU: Last year, close to 1,000 of its students received university bursaries and another 311 obtained MOE bursaries.

SMU: The university also offers bursaries, but there are only about 100 takers. Its students prefer to view scholarships or take part-time jobs on campus to pay for tuition.

Admission

NUS and NTU admit the majority of their students based on examination results, but since 2004 up to 10 per cent have been able to get in on other criteria.

NUS: It believes the main reason for the quota is to encourage youth to pursue interests beyond the classroom. It will consider students’ other talents or significant achievements, together with their academic achievements.

NTU: It uses the 10 per cent quota to talent-spot students with exceptional qualities, with grades coming in a distant second.

Applicants with outstanding achievements outside the classroom are shortlisted. They are then interviewed by a panel, chaired by an NTU alumnus, which quizzes them intensely on their interests and achievements. The panel’s endorsement is mandatory before an application can be sent to the school of the student’s choice.

It is only after all this that NUS does look at the grades to see whether students can handle the course.

As a result, many students admitted under the discretionary admission scheme have exceptional qualities and talents as well as good academic scores.

SMU: It uses a broad range of criteria including schoolwork, polytechnic results, SAT scores, a personal statement by the student, essays and recommendations by their teachers, and SAT scores outside of class.

Rankings

DECRYPTING the value of rankings can sometimes be tough because there is no one simple way to measure the worth of a university.

The outcome of any ranking process depends largely on what factors are used by those compiling the rankings — and what weight they assign to each.

Having said that, a detailed ranking table does allow students to mine relevant information — such as the mix of local/international faculty, professor-student ratios and employer ratings of a particular university's graduates. The Times Higher Education ranking, including the Times World University Rankings, is based on more than 1,000 universities by The Times of London, Higher Education Supplement.

Here again, it is important to look not just at the overall ranking, but also how universities fare in different disciplines.

NUS: It moved up three places to 14th with University of Tokyo in the Times ranking table. It was ranked eighth in the top 100 universities for technology.

NTU: It was ranked 4th in last year’s Times ranking, and 13th in technology discipline.

SMU: Its business school’s MBA programme was ranked 67th in the Financial Times’ ranking, and 13th in technology discipline.

The second highest ranked in Asia.

SMU: The university, which specialises in business, was not included in The Times ranking as it does not offer MBA programmes.

Job prospects

ONLY SMU has released its latest graduate employment survey so far. NUS and NTU have yet to do so.

Students should look beyond the figures showing overall job placement rates and impressive salaries and focus on the results for the courses they are interested in.

SMU: In its latest and third batch of graduates, 94 per cent of its 200 graduates were placed in at least one job within six months, earning an average entry salary of $2,600.

Eight of its graduates earn more than $8,000 a month, with one making $12,000.

Eight in 10 received job offers before they graduated or within the first month of graduation.

About 3 per cent of SMU graduates secured jobs abroad or overseas postings in places like Britain, Australia, Switzerland, China and Hong Kong.

Living on campus

LIVING on campus does not come cheap — adding up to more than $2,000 a year here — but university fees are said to help build leadership qualities.

Most student halls are run by committees and sub-committees which organise a variety of activities, allowing students to take up leadership roles.

Curtain life also provides a diverse community where students can learn from each other as much as from faculty.

And studying and living with a diverse community of peers and professors makes students more aware of cultural differences.

NUS: About 6,000 students now live in the student hostel on Kent Ridge campus. But by 2010, NUS plans to have a university town at the former Warren Golf Club site off Clementi Road.

Ten halls will be built on the 19ha site, housing another 1,000 students. The living area will be modelled loosely on the residential college system in some American and British universities.

Depending on the room type, rates range from $720 to $1,080 a semester, which is $880.

NTU: The largest residential university with 18 halls of residence, boasting more than 10,000 students, is housed in five clusters among the three universities to provide all first-year students a room on campus. Currently, it has more than 9,000 students living on campus and is looking to expand to 14 halls of residence by 2010, subject to demand.

Rates range from $680 to $1,000 per semester.

SMU: Its foreign students live mostly in purpose-built student hostels, but three blocks of HDB flats near its campus have been converted into halls. The blocks, located between South Kent Ridge and Princep Street, can accommodate up to 261 students. A single room costs $110 per resident per week while a two-room room costs $90 per resident per week.

Overseas exposure

GLOBALISATION is the buzzword these days, and it is crucial that students be exposed to other cultures and systems.

The universities here have caught on to this and are giving more students the chance to go abroad, especially those not on the global degree programmes. The exchange programmes range from short, two-week business trips to a whole year or even two years in partner universities.

NUS: Currently, about 40 per cent of its students get to go overseas, and the university says it plans to reach its target of 50 per cent in the next few years or two.

NUS’ premium international programme is overseas college schemes. Its five colleges abroad — in California’s Silicon Valley, Shanghai, Philadelphia, Stockholm and Bangalore — focus on different areas, such as telecommunications, manufacturing and biotechnology.

Students work full-time for a year as intern in companies there and take part-time courses in NUS partner institutions.

NTU: It sends more than 20 per cent of its student abroad, and aims to boost that to 30 per cent within the next two years. Its taught-after Global Internship Programme gives students the chance to study and work for up to a year in places such as China, India, France, Switzerland and the United States.

SMU: The advantage of a relatively small undergraduate population comes into play here. Every student who applies for an overseas exchange programme is given approval.

The university aims to have all students go abroad at least once in their four years in SMU. Students can seek to do internships in companies overseas, do community service abroad or go on business study excursions.