Great idea, but can I study abroad?

By Veena Bharwani

LET'S use the money to study abroad. Undergraduate Abel Yang hopes that the Government will allow him to do that if it introduces education accounts to allow graduates to further their studies.

This recommendation was one of three ideas proposed by the International Academic Advisory Panel last Friday. (See report below, right.)

TO BE FINALISED

The details have yet to be finalised. The panel, for instance, did not say whether the account can be used for overseas studies.

When contacted, the Ministry of Education said it has yet to iron out the details and approve the proposal. It also added that more details will be available during next month's Budget 2007.

It also did not mention how much money would be set aside for each individual.

Still, Mr Yang, 24, a fourth-year computational science student at the National University of Singapore (NUS), is hopeful that it will eventually allow him to do his postgraduate studies in astronomy abroad.

The postgraduate degree can take a maximum of five years. "$200,000 is the worst-case scenario figure, assuming I don't receive any financial aid from the institution."

He has already applied to a few universities in the US and UK. He said: "I want to go abroad to experience a new culture and do courses not available in Singapore.

"If such funds could only be used in Singapore institutions, it would be of limited use to me. So I really hope I can use it for my further education."

Another concern: How much money will be allocated in these accounts, if approved?

Singapore Management University (SMU) undergraduate Felix Tang, 24, said: "If I want to do my MBA abroad at a prestigious university like Harvard or even Insead, I will need a lot of money to finance it. If the amount given to me is too little, then it serves little purpose."

RESEARCH

But students were more optimistic about the other recommendations made by the panel, namely the move to bring research to a higher level in Singapore and getting students more interested in research.

Mr Tan Shen Mynn, 28, a biological sciences postgraduate student at the Nanyang Technological University, said: "It's important to instil a love for research from the beginning. The university already has sophisticated research capabilities in place."

"But these centres could be very helpful in reaching out more to the large undergraduate population which may not be that inclined to research."

The students, however, were sceptical about the proposal for setting up an American-style liberal arts college in Singapore.

Mr Jeremiah Leykumar, a third-year economics student at NUS, pointed out: "Let's look at the numbers. I'm not sure if we will have enough people interested in going to a purely liberal arts college."

US liberal arts colleges like Williams and Haverford usually have only about 2,500 students at the most. They cover pure humanities, sciences and social sciences subjects.

But SMU student Clara Nguyen, 20, is all for it. Miss Nguyen, who is doing a double degree in accountancy and business management, said: "To become a really developed society, you don't train people just to meet the demands of the workforce, you also need to develop people for other needs of the society."

THE PANEL'S GOALS

THE following were the recommendations made by the 12-member International Academic Advisory Panel, chaired by Dr Tony Tan:

Higher-level research

The panel supported the Ministry of Education's plans to set up Research Centres of Excellence (RCE), which will enhance the prestige of Singapore universities.

Another goal of the RCEs will be to get students interested in research.

Liberal arts college

To give students a wider choice of post-secondary education, the panel suggested setting up a small, high-quality private institution similar to liberal arts colleges in the US like Amherst and Williams.

Education accounts

By setting up individual education accounts, the Government can support the continual learning of all Singaporeans.