After the shock, the fury

UNSW tries to placate students with generous offer but ...

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With its reputation on the line, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) went into damage-control mode yesterday and offered students affected by its local campus closure more help to resume their studies in Sydney.

Local students will be given a $22,000 annual scholarship while international students will get $32,000. These scholarships come with no strings attached. Visa applications will be expedited and accommodation has been set aside at UNSW's Sydney campus.

But the 400 students and their parents, who gathered last night at Traders Hotel to hear the university's plans were far from placated. With their future in the balance after Wednesday's shock announcement, they wanted more answers – and they wanted them fast. Harsh words filled the crowded room, with some calling the university's closure, barely two months after classes began for its pioneer batch of students, a "debacle" and "farce". Some even questioned why local government agencies – such as the Economic Development Board, which helped bring UNSW here in 2004, and the Ministry of Education – were not present.

On Wednesday, the Australian university – citing bottomline concerns and a lack of demand – announced that it would close its Singapore campus when the semester ends on June 28.

Earlier yesterday, Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang said that Singapore respects UNSW's decision to close down its campus but would continue to attract other schools here to build up the education landscape.

He also said that UNSW did not do its homework.

"Are they not all students of the university? Why does nationality come in?" He asked.

A third-year mechanical engineering student, who only wanted to be known as Sean, asked if anyone would take responsibility for "forcing us (students) against the wall".

Professor Henry's reply failed to satisfy Sean but the deputy vice-chancellor reiterated that UNSW would do its best to help students and provide options to those who do not wish to study in Sydney. A total of 348 students are enrolled with the university.

Next week, UNSW will fly in an officer from its international office to work with the Australian embassy here to make applying for a visa "as efficient and as effective" as possible.

So far, 20 students have indicated an interest in relocating to Sydney. Fifty are considering moving to Sydney but would prefer to study in Singapore. Sixteen have told UNSW that they have no intention to study in Sydney.

In a statement yesterday, EDB said it is facilitating discussions between UNSW, local universities and the Ministry of Education to find alternatives for those unable to study in Australia.

"The welfare of the affected students and staff is our top concern," said EDB managing director Ko Kheng Hwa.

The three local universities will also offer help to UNSW Asia students. The National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University say they will allow the students to apply for admission.

Applications will have to be submitted before the end of this month. However, admission to courses at NUS that require an interview or test will not be possible. These courses include dentistry, architecture and law.

As for the Singapore Management University, it says it's dealing with more applications than it has places in its six schools. But applications from UNSW students will still be considered on a case-by-case basis.

UNSW has also contacted other Australian universities to help secure places for its Singapore-based students. For example, the Monash University in Malaysia has agreed to take in students who do not wish to study in Sydney.

While the university is doing its best to help students, there is no doubt that its image in the global market has taken a beating.

"It's a huge egg on their face as a provider in South-East Asia," Professor John Kaye, a former UNSW lecturer, told the Singapore Morning Herald.