Varsity fee hike: More students will qualify for aid

BY JANE NG

THE three local universities are beefing up their financial aid schemes so that more students will qualify for help following the tuition fee hike announced on Wednesday.

More scholarships and grants will become available, and eligibility criteria will be lowered.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), for instance, the number of merit-based scholarships and awards has gone up almost four-fold – from 80 in 2006 to the current 300.

Bursaries and loan schemes number about 70.

NUS will also raise the per-capita income ceiling for those eligible for financial aid from $1,000 to $1,100.

Singapore citizens receiving financial aid, who were previously required to pay a portion of the tuition fee, will no longer need to. Help schemes now cover the entire course fee.

These measures mean that 18 per cent of students will be on some form of financial aid, up from the current 10 per cent, when the new fees kick in August.

The fee hikes of between 4 and 20 per cent at the universities translate into a $250 increase a year for most courses. The exceptions are in the law and business programmes at NUS and the Singapore Management University (SMU), where fees will rise by up to $1,200 a year.

The increases, the first since 2006, come on the back of rising manpower and operating costs.

At SMU, where fee increases are between 10 and 12 per cent, about 50 scholarships will be available.

The proportion of students receiving financial grants will also jump from last year’s one in eight to one in six.

Chances of snagging scholarships will also go up: one in eight among those entering SMU this August, against one in 10 in 2006.

SMU’s Dean of Students, Associate Professor Low Aik Meng, urged those who need financial help to approach the university to explore aid options.

“Our qualifying criteria are not set in stone,” he said.

Nanyang Technological University, which is increasing fees by 4 per cent across the board, would only say it is working with the Education Ministry to enhance its help schemes.

Eighteen-year-old Jeremy Koh, who wants to read law, is banking on a scholarship of some sort.

The only child of a taxi driver and a housewife said: “An increase is an increase, no matter how you put it. It will put pressure on my parents.”

The universities say they risk losing their best academics if they do not pay salaries matching what the industries offer.

NUS law dean Tan Cheng Han said that, in addition to wage pressures, the faculty wants to continue keeping class sizes small – at about 13 students.

The school has also had to offer more specialisations to meet market demand, for instance, in comparative law and foreign law.