More students applying for scholarships this year

Surge could be due to better grades and greater awareness

BY SAMANTHA ENG

THERE has been a surge in university scholarship applications this year, according to a Web portal which provides a one-stop service.

This strong interest comes amid a recent online debate on scholarships in Singapore, both government and non-government, now considered more discerning, especially the top students.

Mr Lim Der Shing, director of JobsFactory, the company that runs the portal.

The top five scholarship providers - the Public Service Commission (PSC), FIREfly, Singapore Airlines (SIA), National Healthcare Group and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) - all drew more responses this year than last year.

Organisations say they do not fix the number of scholarship places as these depend on the standard of the applicants for that year.

The PSC, the biggest scholarship provider, saw the number of applicants jumping from 1,700 last year to 2,000 this year.

It awards some 50 to 60 scholarships each year, while the various government ministries give out 140 to 150. Government bonds can last up to six years.

SIA landed 2,062 applications this year, compared to last year's 1,500. It grants six to eight scholarships a year, with bonds lasting four years.

Mr Lim attributed the surge to two factors: better grades and more publicity.

He dismissed suggestions that the rise is due to multiple applications by top students, saying: "If anything, students are getting more discerning, especially the top students.

"There's no point applying for engineering scholarships if you don't want to be an engineer."

In fact, the average number of applications per student has decreased from nine last year to seven this year.

A Straits Times check with 20 A-level holders with at least four distinctions revealed that most had applied for scholarships.

One of National Junior College's top scorers, 19-year-old Yoon Ji Wei, whose dad is a retiree, feels a scholarship is the only way to get an overseas education.

Armed with eight distinctions, he plans to read physics at Cambridge University or Caltech University.

He has applied for scholarships from the Defence Science & Technology Agency as well as A*Star. He is also considering scholarships such as the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Global Merit Scholarship, NTU's Nan- yang Scholarship and the Singapore Management University (SMU) Scholarship - have also seen an increase in scholarship applications.

The number for NTU has hit 1,050, up from 950 last year, while NUS' figure is close to 2,000, rising from 1,300 last year.

SMU did not give any figures as its scholarship applications are still open.

An NTU spokesman said: "We offer bond-free scholarships to attract top-talent students to study at NTU."

Typically, a full scholarship covers tuition, hostel fees, an annual book allowance and a monthly allowance. For an overseas scholarship, air tickets are also part of the deal.

When asked whether having to serve a bond deters people from applying for scholarships, Mr Lim said: "At the end of the day, the popularity and prestige of a scholarship are not diminished, even with the bond."

The current debate on bonds was sparked off three weeks ago after Mr Andre Oei, a PSC scholar at the London School of Economics, wrote in to The Straits Times' YouthDrink section to say he knew of current scholars who may want to break their bonds.

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