Fee hike at NUS, NTU and SMU, but cohort-based system means fees will be fixed during course of study

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TWO years after their last tuition fee increase, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) are set to raise fees again -- by four per cent this time -- for undergraduate courses in the coming academic year, due to a rise in manpower and operating costs.

But incoming students will not have to worry about another hike further down the road. Both universities have introduced a cohort-based structure in which fees are set prior to students' enrolment and remain unchanged throughout their course of study.

This will facilitate undergraduates' long-term financial planning and "reduce the sense of uncertainty about total cost of studies," said provost Tan Eng Chye of NUS, where students had indicated a strong preference for a cohort-based system after the last three-per-cent hike in 2006 took many by surprise.

Another change: To reflect greater fee differentiation between Singaporean students and other students -- as announced by the Government in 2006 -- permanent residents and foreign students from this year will pay 10 per cent and 50 per cent more respectively than locals.

Foreign students on a tuition grant bond will now pay $9,540 and $7,000, while Singaporeans will fork out $6,360 for most undergraduate courses. Fees for current students and National Servicemen admitted earlier will be unchanged.

Yesterday, both universities cited the rising costs of delivering top-quality education as a reason for the fee revisions.

NTU Associate Provost Er Meng Hwa said, in a statement, that fees were reviewed annually to ensure NTU could continue to attract top researchers and scientists. "This increase, in fact, will only help partially recover costs needed to sustain quality and excellence."

At a media briefing, Professor Tan said NUS would have increased fees earlier, but had held back because of other rising living costs last year, such as the Goods and Services Tax hike. At NUS, the fee hike will be greater for its business (7 per cent) and law (20 per cent) programmes. Hiring talent to teach at these two faculties in particularly costly because of the global competition for top business and law talent, explained Prof Tan.

For instance, a fresh PhD graduate in marketing from a top American university would command an annual salary of up to US$180,000 ($255,000). "This figure is quite hefty and we can't pay that, but we try to get close to that," he said.

The university is also seeking to improve staff-student ratio from the current average of one instructor to 22 students to one instructor to 18 students, he added.

Ms Liu Meng Qi, 18, who will be applying for a university place this year, felt that if the increase could ensure better teaching and infrastructure, it would be "worth it". "But if the increase in cost for us is more than what's needed to sustain the school, then I don't think it's justified," she said.

Others potential applicants, like Ms Tang Yuting, 18, thought the fees "affordable", and were glad the cohort-based fee structure would guarantee some certainty.

Hostel fees are also going up at NUS. The $60-a-week rate for a single room and $40 for a double room will be raised in increments to $100 and $70 respectively by 2010.

The current charges, said Prof Tan, were no longer adequate in meeting the operating costs of maintaining and upgrading its hostels. Said undergraduate Sim Ji Vern, president of the Junior Common Room Committee at one of NUS' residential halls: "The rationale may be valid, but it will be hard to swallow for some ... some students say they would rather pay for a car than fork out $100 a week for a room."

Both universities gave the assurance that no student would be denied an university education because of financial difficulties, and that financial assistance plans were in place.