

Dons allege bias in NTU policy on tenure



Associate Professor Michael Heng, from NTU's School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, wrote to The Straits Times last month alleging "serious lapses" in the process of awarding tenure. ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

Coveted contract at centre of controversy

By AMELIA TAN

A GROUP of professors from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has raised a protest to varsity heads over the process of awarding tenure.

Unhappy about what they call a "non-transparent" process, the group of about 10 has sent e-mail messages to the heads of their respective schools as well as to NTU provost Bertil Andersson, who has said the claims are baseless.

The group has also sought help from the Education Services Union (ESU), a body affiliated to the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) which was set up to promote good relations between employees of private education institutions and their employers.

However, the group was turned away because ESU can represent only bargainable employees, and university faculty members are considered non-bargainable staff. Instead, the ESU has referred the case to the Ministry of Manpower.

At the centre of the professors' complaint is something called the T65 contract, which guarantees them a place on the teaching staff till they hit the age of 65. It is the most coveted contract among professors.

More than a dozen professors have claimed that the selection process for the contract is "biased and undemocratic". Last year, 640 of NTU's 1,500 faculty members applied for the T65 contract. Of these, 55 per cent, or 352 professors, were awarded the contract.

Some of those who missed out are now claiming that they deserved it too as they had more publications to their names or were rated higher on student feedback forms than some professors who received the coveted tenure.

However, the university's administration has defended the integrity of its review process.

Professor Andersson said that since 2007, the process has involved internal committees and external referees assessing T65 applicants on the merit of their research, teaching and service to the university.

He added that members of the Academic Research Council, set up by the Ministry of Education to oversee national research and development efforts, had commented that NTU's 55 per cent tenure success rate squared with international standards.

Prof Andersson also said the unhappy professors were in the minority. Only 5 per cent of the 288 unsuccessful T65 applicants had sent in appeals.

However, 15 or so professors who spoke or wrote to The Straits Times insist they have a case.

Associate Professor Michael Heng, from NTU's School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, is among them.

He wrote to the newspaper last month, alleging "serious lapses" in the process. He said that in internal school meetings, faculty members were told by their Chairs that only research counted in the tenure review. They were told teaching and service to the university were not important, he said.

He added: "This is taxpayers' money we are talking about, so this is of public interest."

The other professors, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they agreed with him. They said they had tried in the past to get their views aired, but without success.

After being turned away by the ESU, they attempted to set up their own union, and went as far as drawing up a draft Constitution. But NTUC advised them against doing this because unions should represent all employees in an organisation, not just its executive-level ones.

When contacted for comment, a Ministry of Manpower spokesman said: "MOM encourages employers and employees to engage in constructive dialogue through established internal grievance management procedures. MOM will render assistance where necessary."

Tenure review processes at the National University of Singapore and Singapore Management University are similar to those at NTU.

NUS and SMU spokesmen said multiple layers of checks were in place to ensure transparency, and that tenure review is an accepted practice at the universities.

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