Public policy planning — no easy matter

Winners of the Public Policy Challenge 2008 tackled tough issues and gained unique insights in the process

A RECENT public policy competition organised by the Public Service Division gave undergraduates an insider’s glimpse into the intricacies of policymaking.

The three winning teams topped 100 groups of four each from the National University of Singapore (NUS), the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University. Here are the winners’ stories:

Putting theory into practice

DURING our undergraduate economic studies, we got to learn about the formulation of government policies and their effects on both the economic and societal front, which led to us developing a keen interest in the topic.

Thus driven, we wanted to apply what we learned at the Public Policy Challenge.

Our key recommendations included adjusting the criteria of the Workfare Income Supplement, which is effective in reducing the income gap without distorting the work incentive.

The cut-off salary rate for WIS should also be pegged to inflation to account for the loss of real income in the high inflationary environment.

The team also recommended a “reverse” workfare bonus assessment scheme, which takes into account factors such as dependency ratio when assessing the amount of workfare bonus an individual gets.

It was a fulfilling experience.

It was tough considering multiple issues, but that has enabled us to better understand certain unpopular policy choices that the Singapore Government has had to make.

The competition itself has helped us gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities and challenges of public policymaking, especially in the context of a small and open Singapore.

First-prize winners, Team PVP, from NUS, are Economics majors Hs Kim Chyeong and Khan Kamal (second year); and Lim Pei Wen and Mohyn Yan Jing Lin (third year).

Infinite demands, finite resources

OUR recommendations, among many others, included long-term modifications to the health-related policies, and increasing stability by sourcing Singapore’s food supply through contract farming.

This, after considering the infinite demands of the population versus finite resources, risks, rewards and policy-trade-offs, and after research on countries’ policy models, journals, among others.

Our take:

A policymaker cannot please all.

He or she needs strong foresight. Also, policies must receive consistent constructive feedback and monitoring during development, because it is a highly delicate balancing process, fraught with uncertainty and many ethical considerations.

Failures can lead to waste of resources, loss of public confidence, or worse, hurt Singapore’s long-term interests.

Such work takes a whole dedicated team. This brought home the impressive work of the civil sector – its integration of various ministerial functions to commit to broad uniform goals.

Good work, Singapore!

Second-prize winners, Team Quintessential, from NTU, are Cherms Ching (third-year business major), Isaac Shua (third-year accountancy major), Catherine Ng (third-year accountancy major) and Sook Hung (third-year business major).

Aerial view of policymaking

NO SLEEP, mounting anxiety, interpersonal conflict and nerve-racking presentations – surreal yet strangely intriguing.

We recommended greater commitment to small and medium-sized enterprises as we hoped to root them in Singapore.

We also wanted to modify the existing Community Involvement Programme to allow students a choice of which beneficiaries to help, allowing them to develop a greater sense of connection with their beneficiaries and promote the spirit of voluntarism.

We encountered one revelation: all policies, no matter how thoughtfully framed, are bound to affect other sectors of society, sometimes adversely.

The competition, it seemed, turned out to be a unique opportunity to gain an aerial view of policymaking, while being fun.

Third-prize winners, Team one-sixty-five, from NUS are: See Ru Bin (fourth-year political science major), Shane Roberts (fourth-year sociology major), and Lyn Kit Wan and Valerie Tan (fourth-year geography majors).