Students in public policy competition learn about process of policymaking and its many challenges.

Fifteen teams went on to the semi-finals over the weekend at Changi Village Hotel, where they played the Prime Minister's principal private secretary.

Their brief this time was to advise the Prime Minister on issues he should address for his National Day Rally speech—such as the widening income gap and the loss of national identity.

Three teams, including Miss Neo's, made it to the finals yesterday. In their 20-minute presentations, they had to factor in a last-minute bird flu outbreak in a neighbouring country.

Their proposals included bringing forward the rally so that the PM could reassure Singaporeans. Other ideas: provide aid to the neighbour, and use the crisis as an opportunity to reinforce the sense of nationhood.

The contest aimed to expose students to the intricacies of policymaking: the difficult choices to be made, and the need to cater to different groups, said Mr Teo Chee Hian.

The Minister in charge of the Civil Service told reporters that young people tend to understand the workings of business more than public service.

“They may have less understanding of both the challenge and the meaning, as well as the inherent satisfaction of public service.”

He highlighted a big difference between running businesses and making policies: “You are working for the welfare of Singaporeans and the future of Singaporeans, and not just the bottom line of the company and of the shareholders.”

The judges for the finals were Civil Service head Peter Ho, Permanent Secretary (Public Service Division) Lim Soo Hoon and Second Permanent Secretary (Trade and Industry) Ravi Menon.

The champions from NUS won $2,000 cash and an internship with the Civil Service. The runners-up from NTU received $1,500; with another NUS team in third place, getting $1,000. The remaining 12 teams won $250 each.

Miss Neo, whose team was third, now feels the work of policymakers is challenging. “It’s easy to criticise a policy, but I’ve come to see all sides of the picture.”

“It’s a huge responsibility because it affects many people.”

Another who had felt policymaking was top-down was NUS economics student Khaw Kai Min, 22. He said: “I’ve learnt that you can’t please all groups of society.” His team won first place.