Fee hike unlikely to deter foreign students

University fees in Singapore still competitive globally despite the recent increase

BY KAREN ZAINAL & LUKE VJAY

RECENT news of fee hikes in Singapore’s three public universities is unlikely to steer potential foreign students away from our shores because the new fees remain internationally competitive.

After the hikes – meant to differentiate foreign and permanent residents from citizens – a foreign undergraduate studying at the National University of Singapore (NUS) or Nanyang Technological University, for example, would have to pay $11,050 for tuition per year for an arts degree. This is up from $6,930 last year.

The Singapore Management University now charges foreign students $15,830 for all its courses other than law, compared to $14,400 last year.

Despite the increase, however, Singapore remains competitive, especially when compared to the United States, a popular destination for many students worldwide. The average undergraduate degree in an American university could cost a foreign student about $40,000 more per year.

For that amount, parents in countries such as India and China may be able to send three to four of their children to study here, and that is why it remains competitive, said education analysts.

Dr Steven Lai, the chief executive officer of PSB Academy, said it was not just a question of cost.

“We are in a very good position to compete in the international student market. The combination of competitive costs, high quality education and a good environment proves to be very attractive to international students and parents."

The key reason behind the significant gap in the tuition fees between the US and Singapore may be the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) student grant.

So long as international students agree to work in Singapore for three years after graduation, they get to enjoy up to $58,200 in tuition fee subsidies, depending on the course they study.

Only about 5 per cent of international students in public universities here pay the full unsubsidised fees, said an MOE spokesman.

However, while the US remains fairly expensive compared to Singapore, some other favourite destinations are closing the gap, the most noticeable being the universities in Britain, with the falling pound being a key factor. In 2007, the exchange rate was $5.01 for £1. As of yesterday, it was $4.15 for £1. This reduces the cost of an education in Britain significantly. (See other report)

Asian universities such as the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University in Japan may be cheaper than Singapore in terms of fees, but most of the undergraduate lectures are conducted in Japanese, even those for international students.

Professor Tan King Chee, NUS Provost and deputy president (academic affairs), remained confident when the fee hikes were announced, saying: “The new fees remain very competitive with international programmes of distinction. The new fee adjustments will help defray part of the operating costs of providing a quality education.”

Foreign students studying here agree. Said 19-year-old Nguyen Tuan Phuong, a first-year Vietnamese student at NUS: “Even though I’m not very comfortable with the increase, I guess for the education we get it’s still worth it.”

But there are those who would opt for alternatives, and they may not be the traditional ones.

Indonesian Yesslin Ongly, 20, who completed her secondary school education in Singapore but returned to Jakarta to attend the GSE Institute of Business, said: “Of course Singapore is still competitive. The quality of its education is comparable to that of universities in the US and the United Kingdom, and at a fraction of the cost.

“However, the quality of tertiary education in other South-east Asian countries, like the colleges in Indonesia, has also improved a lot over the past few years.”