

THE STRAITS TIMES

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

On The Ground

Helping less privileged students financially goes beyond dollars and cents



Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent



With financial support, Ms Melanis Tai could go for an internship exchange in Sydney and represent Singapore in an international beauty pageant in South Korea. PHOTO: MELANIS TAI

PUBLISHED FEB 9, 2022, 5:20 PM SGT

SINGAPORE - Receiving a bursary from her university did not just help Ms Melanis Tai financially, it also enabled her to pursue her interests.

With the financial support, the National University of Singapore (NUS) alumnus could go for an internship exchange in Sydney and represent Singapore in an international beauty pageant in South Korea during her undergraduate days, all without having to worry too much about whether she could afford to do so.

Ms Tai, 25, a communications and new media major who graduated from the faculty of arts and social sciences last December, received the Chia Siew Wong Bursary, on top of a government bursary which together covered part of her tuition fees and living expenses during her 3½ years in NUS.

NUS' plans to channel an extra \$15 million a year, starting in 2022, to support undergraduates from needy families will ensure cost does not deter them from pursuing further studies.

In response to queries from The Straits Times, an NUS spokesman said that before its latest enhancement in support, in a typical year, it spends about \$17 million in the form of bursaries to support students from low-income families with their tuition fees, living and accommodation expenses as well as expenses for overseas exposure.

Taking care of their tuition fees fully - for those who come from homes with per capita income of up to \$1,000 - will help to ease their worries about not being able to afford a degree course, or having to work while studying to pay off huge loans.

In addition, NUS wants to ensure that extra-curricular programmes remain within the reach of all students, and are not only for those who can afford them.

Get Singapore Budget 2022 newsletter in your inbox

Read e-mail alert on key highlights from Budget 2022. Also, get ST Evening Update.

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms and Conditions](#).

Other local universities have similar initiatives for less privileged students.

In 2017, Singapore Management University (SMU) set up a funding programme, known as SMU Access, that covers tuition fees of recipients fully, after taking into account other grants and financial assistance from the Government.

In 2019, Singapore University of Technology and Design also launched a grant that guaranteed the same for undergraduates in need of help.

Lightening the financial load of students also means they can have the bandwidth to think about pursuing other activities, like exchange programmes, which have become an integral part of university life for many young people.

Some tertiary students even go for multiple overseas stints and internships because they feel they learn the most about the real world through exposure to a variety of experiences.

Ms Tai, the oldest of three children whose single mother works as a service staff member at a food and beverage kiosk, had hesitated about applying for a student exchange overseas because that would mean she would have to forgo several months' pay from her part-time job as a front-desk staff member in a fitness studio.

But with the bursary covering some of the expenses like her plane tickets and student visa, she decided to go for it and had no regrets, even though her exchange stint in 2020 was cut short by the Covid-19 pandemic.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[About 3,300 undergrads set to benefit as NUS ramps up financial aid](#)

[SUTD undergrads to receive up to \\$12k each in new education grant](#)

Taking part in these activities beyond schoolwork, said Ms Tai, who is now working in the public service, gave her a "richer and fuller university life" and bolstered her resume when she was looking to clinch an internship with a reputable organisation.

During her university days, she continued to work part-time on weekends and on some weekday nights for pocket money as well as to pay back her tuition fee loan, but she had peace of mind and some time freed up to pursue her interests.

Making sure that all students regardless of their financial background have access to higher education, and the opportunities that come along with it, is crucial in Singapore's efforts to spur social mobility.

A person's cultural capital is built up through life experiences, and he gains important life skills, networks and assets through experiences outside textbooks and the classroom, and sometimes, outside the country.

It could be through interacting with an acquaintance who may later become an important connection, or learning the varied cultures of others through exposure to people from other countries.

These opportunities must remain open to every student who qualifies by merit.

And with the Covid-19 pandemic laying bare the faultlines of inequality in society, the support for students to access education in its fullest potential must continue, and start from young.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[Over 1,000 NTU students receive financial aid from university's Covid-19 relief package](#)

[SIT fund helps needy undergrads tide over Covid-19 fallout](#)