

Helping needy undergrads financially goes beyond dollars and cents

Pursuing enriching activities like overseas exchange programmes becomes more viable

On The Ground



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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, 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 NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 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 university.

NUS' plans to channel an extra \$15 million a year, starting this year, 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*, a spokesman for NUS said that before its latest enhancement in support, in a

typical year, it spent 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 – helps to ease their worries about not being able to afford a degree course or having to work while studying to pay off huge loans.

NUS also wants to ensure that extracurricular programmes remain within the reach of all students and not only for those who can afford them.

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 recipients' tuition fees fully, after taking into

account other grants and financial assistance from the Government.

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

Lightening the financial load of students means they can have the bandwidth to think about pursuing other activities, such as 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-parent 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 – such as for her plane tickets and student visa – she decided to go for it and has had no regrets, even though her exchange stint in 2020 was cut short by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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 pandemic laying bare the fault lines of inequality in society, the support for students to access education to the fullest potential must continue, and start from a young age.



With the bursaries, Ms Melanis Tai could focus on her studies and take part in overseas programmes, including representing Singapore in an international beauty pageant in South Korea in 2019. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MELANIS TAI