

NUS to extend grade-free scheme for freshmen

It will let students write off less stellar grades for up to eight modules in their first year

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For the last two years, the National University of Singapore has allowed its freshmen a grade-free semester to help them transition into degree studies – a scheme which has proven very popular.

Now, the university wants to take it further, by allowing a virtually grade-free first year.

Currently, the university allows its students to write off their less-than-stellar grades of up to five modules in their first semester.

From this August, first-year stu-

dents can write off grades for up to eight modules – just two short of the 10 modules they take.

Under the scheme, all students, even if they have an A, may choose to include or exclude the grade in their final grade point average. But those with a D+ and below who want it crossed out must retake the module or take another.

The scheme applies to nearly all NUS faculties and schools, including arts and social sciences, business, computing, engineering and science. The NUS law and medical faculties already have a grade-free system for freshmen.

NUS provost Tan Eng Chye said the scheme has proven to be a hit



with its first-year students. The university takes in about 7,000 students a year.

Around 87 per cent took up the option to drop their grade for at least one module. A small proportion, around 5 per cent, did so for five modules.

He said the aim was to reduce academic stress and encourage students to explore subjects outside

their specialisation, including areas they are less confident in. But those who do well will still be rewarded as they can keep their grades.

The university also analysed the system to ensure that students were not slacking. “The analysis suggests that student academic performance was not compromised, even though now students can ask for their grades to be omitted. NUS

students were not complacent and continued to be academically engaged,” said Professor Tan.

He reported that students have become more adventurous in their choice of modules, venturing beyond their “academic comfort zones”. Nearly a third of the modules read by first-year students last year were non-core modules, outside of their immediate field of

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study. In the previous year, the figure was about a quarter.

“This is a positive development. Students are increasingly making good use of the opportunities of being in a comprehensive university to broaden their perspectives and horizons by reading modules beyond their degree discipline.”

Highlighting the Education Ministry’s push to reduce the over-emphasis on grades, he hopes that the further extension of the scheme will create even more time, space and opportunities to pursue “adventurous and deep learning, and to move away from the over-emphasis on grades”.

“MOE recognises that education is not about training book smarts – the emphasis should be on learning. There is no need to grade, sort and differentiate students at every possible juncture.

“In the same spirit, the freshman year is an opportune time to immerse oneself in the social and academic culture of university life, to uncover, discover and pursue one’s intellectual curiosities and passions.”

English literature student Samantha Nah, 19, said she would not have taken a course in Chinese linguistics if not for the grade-free semester scheme. “I wanted to take up the course as it would allow me to compare Chinese linguistics with English linguistics. But my Chinese is not that strong and I didn’t think I would do well in it.”

Mr Nicholas Tan, 21, who will be entering the science faculty in NUS this year, said he chose to enrol in NUS because of the grade-free scheme. “I am going to study science, but I do want to explore some arts subjects such as sociology and languages such as Bahasa Indonesia. It will be good if I can take up these courses and not worry about it pulling down my grade point average.”

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