

## News analysis

# *A new way of learning awaits NUS students*

## New college shows school is serious about breaking down the walls between subjects



**Amelia Teng**

Education Correspondent

The plan by the National University of Singapore (NUS) to house two of its oldest faculties – arts and social sciences, and science – under a new college is a major shift away from the traditional way of learning in silos.

Both faculties date as far back as 1929, and, over the years, have grown their pool of specialisations – from psychology and history to mathematics and life sciences.

But today's issues and jobs are complex, and a new way of thinking and learning needs to be forged to better prepare students for the world beyond school subjects.

The new College of Humanities and Sciences at NUS sends a very strong signal that the institution is serious about breaking down the walls between subjects and encouraging the interdisciplinary sharing of expertise across fields.

This is the latest push in NUS' efforts in recent years to become increasingly flexible in its curricula.

The university had announced in June that it would be offering 10 cross-disciplinary degree programmes from August next year.

NUS has also seen a healthy interest from students in its double-degree programmes, as well as more demand for double majors and minors – an indication that young people are increasingly keen on broadening their perspectives.

The new college must take it a step further, so that students do not just

pursue multiple areas of interest, but are able to see how and where they intersect.

The 13 common modules they have to take – in areas such as computational reasoning, writing and design thinking – aim to give them a broad understanding of intellectual approaches across the humanities, social sciences, scientific inquiry and Asian studies. They will spend a third of their overall curriculum on such modules, and more interdisciplinary projects look set to be a bigger part of their learning.

Working with peers from other disciplines can help expose students to viewpoints they may not have considered.

These changes are necessary if universities want to keep pace with the needs of the job market and technological changes.

Students will still graduate with a bachelor's degree in arts, social sciences or science. But having depth of knowledge alone is not sufficient to wrestle with societal issues that cut across disciplines.

As NUS president Tan Eng Chye wrote in a commentary in *The Straits Times* earlier this month, disciplinary rigour will still be necessary, but students will have to be able to draw connections across different fields.

He cited British philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who divided thinkers into two types: hedgehogs, who know that one big thing; and foxes, who know many things.

The world will need both the hedgehog and the fox for their qualities, said Professor Tan.

The hope is that NUS' decision to restructure the two faculties will help produce graduates with depth and breadth, and prepare them for an ever-changing world.

ateng@sph.com.sg