Broad-based curriculum a key feature of some unis in S’pore

Such interdisciplinary education helps grads be more flexible, say recruitment experts

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Several universities in Singapore already have courses that bridge disciplines in a bid to offer undergraduates a broad-based education, experts said.

In particular, tertiary institutions with curricula influenced by the US model allow students to break out of silos such as purely humanities or hard sciences courses, said Natio-
nal Institute of Education dean Jan-
say Tan.

These institutions include the Sin-
gapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), Yale-NUS Col-
lege and Singapore Management Uni-
versity (SMU).

For instance, despite its focus on technology, SUTD requires students to take courses in the humanities and social sciences, Associate Professor Tan said.

And Nanyang Technological University’s (NTU) colliages ensure that all students combine subjects from different specialized fields, such as engineering and business.

On Wednesday, The Straits Times reported that the National University of Singapore (NUS) was set to launch a new College of Arts and Social Sciences and Faculty of Science to form a College of Humanities and Sciences.

If these plans are approved by the authorities, the college could begin accepting students next August, for the 2023 academic year.

Students will be able to take cours-
es across disciplines before choos-
ing a specialization. They will also have access to facilities and courses in both the NUS faculties, which will still exist. This will allow stu-
dents to refine disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, sci-
ence and mathematics.

Expected to be moved by NUS fol-
lores in the footprints of universities in Singapore and abroad that adopt a broad-based or liberal arts ap-
proach popular in the United States.

For instance, a key feature at Yale-NUS College is a common cur-
iculum. All students take modules such as quantitative reasoning, sci-
entific inquiry and modern social thought.

Professor Tan said the move by NUS indi-

cates that it recognizes that old ways of teaching and learning may no longer be enough. “However, it is harder to dismantle long estab-
lished structures than to start some-
thing brand new, which is an advan-
tage the younger universities have. “The fact that NUS is doing this now shows that they see the urgent need to expand the base and direction of broad-based learning,” he added.

As NUS spokesman said the new college “will feature some elements of A-level arts education”.

The common curriculum is to be de-
veloped and will draw on the strengths of both existing faculties, whose de-
partments “have both a strong repu-
tation for academic research and excel-
ence” over the years, she added.

She said: “NUS has had successful experiences with delivering inter-
disciplinary studies in similar set-
ing, such as the University Schol-
s, Programmes, Residential Col-
lege Programmes and Special Pro-
grammes in Science.”

The college wants to expand this to allow students to benefit more students, she added.

NUS had earlier announced plans for a common core curriculum for all undergraduates entering next August – except for those in med-
ical school.

The modules, which will take up a fifth of the academic workload, are

designed to enable students to inte-
grate knowledge across disciplines and develop skills in communica-
tion, digital literacy, enterprise and innovation, among others, NTU said. Professor Tan Ooi Kiang, NUS’s deputy provost for education, said the university has interdisciplinary programmes such as the Human-
ities, Engineering Programme, Life Sci-
cence and Chemistry.

SMU provost Timothy Clark said its undergraduate curriculum al-
ready offers a high level of flexibil-
ity. “Our students may enrol for up to seven school regardless of the degree programmes they are enrolled in,” he said.

Most SMU students graduate with a second major, a second de-
gree, or both.

Professor Clark said SMU has co-

matrix core modules that form 33

per cent of its undergraduate cur-
riculum, and the university has also launched initiatives for students to work in multidisciplinary teams to address actual industry problems.

Recent graduates say having both specialized and soft skills is nec-
necessary in today’s job market. They added that an interdiscipli-

dary education can help graduates be more flexible and open-minded as they solve real-world problems.

David Lee, managing director of human resource consultancy Peopleworldwide Consulting, said the larger college planned by NUS should provide flexible study combi-

nations of humanities and sciences.

“This should result in graduates with more balanced perspectives, which can help them address global issues differently,” he said.

Mr Vinay Sri, managing director of recruitment firm CareerBuilder Singapore, said employers are increasingly looking out for skills and aptitudes over qualifications.

APRIL WONG Managing director of human resource consultancy Peopleworldwide Consulting told The Straits Times that the new college could provide flexibility to students.

URGENT NEED FOR CHANGE

It is harder to dismantle long-established structures than to

start something brand-new, which is an advantage the younger universities have. The fact that NUS is doing this now shows that they see the urgent need to move in the direction of broad-based learning.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION (NIE) head, Dr Mahendra Senthilnathan, said the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Faculty of Science is on track to form a College of Humanities and Sciences.

BALANCED PERSPECTIVES

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