

PREMIUM

Not your father's arts degree, says NUS faculty dean



National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences dean, Professor Robbie Goh, chatting with two first-year students from his faculty, Mr Ashruff Muhammed Ibrahim, 22, who is keen on pursuing economics, and Ms Nelle Ng, 19, a politics, philosophy and economics student. PHOTO: KELLY HUI

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Five 'industry tracks' among big shifts to make students more job-ready

Amelia Teng Education Correspondent

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS) is going all out to make its students more job-ready and aware of what they can bring to future employers.

The faculty, one of the institution's largest which takes in around 1,600 undergraduates each year, introduced "industry tracks" this year, with the aim of helping students curate modules with job sectors in mind.

There are five tracks: public administration; communications, advertising and media; banking and finance; society, community and health; and arts, culture, entertainment and heritage.

Students in the programme will be paired with mentors, go for internships and attend an industry seminar to learn about work trends.

The faculty also allows students to use internships to earn credits worth up to three modules.

Its figures show that the proportion of students going on internships tripled, from 14 per cent for the graduating batch in 2015 to 42 per cent last year.

Faculty dean Robbie Goh told *The Straits Times*: "We are looking to enhance our graduates' employability.

"They have always been very flexible and able to adjust to disruptions in industries. But maybe this is not as clearly branded to employers."

The faculty has made big shifts, he added, in providing "a less inward-looking, and classroom-focused" form of arts education, while preserving the "traditional excellence" of each discipline.

"In many ways, it's not your father's arts degree," quipped Professor Goh, who was speaking to *The Straits Times* in conjunction with the faculty's 90th anniversary this year.

Students get to reflect on traits and skills they have during internships, added Prof Goh, rather than just enjoy the fields of study and not go beyond traditional jobs they feed into.

For instance, a literature undergraduate could also communicate effectively, he said.

"I am now able to understand discourses and narratives, the chief executive's speech, I understand the annual report in terms of narratives and semiotics rather than just saying 'I like Austen' or 'I like Shakespeare'."

With this in mind, the five industry tracks the faculty has drawn up - with input from alumni and industry partners - aim to guide students as they pick their majors and modules. They will also need to take modules on hard skills such as research, computational thinking, big data and negotiation.

Another way the faculty hopes to broaden student experiences is by increasing the percentage of those who go on overseas programmes to 90 per cent in the academic year starting in August next year. This is up from about 60 per cent to 70 per cent now.

The faculty has also introduced initiatives like a politics, philosophy and economics (PPE) programme for top students, combining skills and knowledge across the three disciplines while allowing them to specialise in one area.

Marking 90 years with social initiatives

The National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences was set up in 1929 as part of the former Raffles College, offering English, history, geography and economics.

Today, it has 20 majors across fields like humanities, social sciences and Asian studies.

The faculty is marking its 90th anniversary this year with initiatives to provide more help to less privileged students and contribute to social needs. A social incubator programme was started with help from former Normanton Park residents, who donated part of their end-bloc proceeds to start a fund.

Professor Robbie Goh, dean of the faculty, said: "The idea is for students under faculty supervision to work in multi-disciplinary teams, and find innovative solutions to social issues."

These solutions could involve the use of technology, he said, adding: "In these ways, we want to ensure the faculty is engaged with society and relevant to society."

He also said the faculty continues to raise funds for students who need financial help.

A new faculty Alumni Bursary Fund will give about 20 bursaries worth \$1,500 each year to undergraduates, starting from the next academic year.

The faculty this year also announced a Student Advancement Fund, which provides financial assistance to needy students to take part in opportunities outside of the classroom.

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The PPE programme, which started last year, now has 25 undergraduates - a mix of first- and second-year students. It drew 300 inaugural applicants.

The number of students placing the faculty as first choice in the past five years has stayed at nearly 6,000, but Prof Goh said it has seen more interest from top performers.

The number of A-level students with five As and one B applying to the faculty has risen by about 20 per cent in the same time period.

One of these applicants, now a first-year NUS student Nelle Ng, decided to go for PPE as she liked the idea of mixing three disciplines.

Ms Ng, 19, is spending two weeks in Dubai this month as part of a study trip to learn about the culture and network with people.

"Studying and working are very different, and I realised studying alone is not enough for us to learn soft skills," she said.

Polytechnic graduate Ashruff Muhammed Ibrahim, now in his first year at NUS, is keen on pursuing economics, which comes under the banking and finance track.

Mr Ashruff, 22, said he is looking forward to having a mentor who can share his work experiences.

"It's also a win-win situation when our internships can be credit-bearing. Some of the hard skills like research are good to have in a resume, for employers to see."