

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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Education Correspondent

Several universities in Singapore already have courses that straddle 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 National Institute of Education don Jason Tan.

These institutions include the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), Yale-NUS College and Singapore Management University (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 (NTU) offers courses that allow students to combine subjects from different specialised fields, such as engineering and business.

On Wednesday, *The Straits Times* reported that the National University of Singapore (NUS) plans to bring together its Faculty 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 next academic year.

Students will be able to take courses across disciplines before choosing a specialisation. They will also have access to facilities and courses in both the NUS faculties, which will still exist. This will allow students to embrace disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, science and mathematics.

Experts said the move by NUS follows in the footsteps of universities in Singapore and abroad that adopt a broad-based or liberal arts approach popular in the United States.

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

Prof Tan said the move by NUS indicates that it recognises that old ways of teaching and learning may no longer be enough. "However, 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."

An NUS spokesman said the new college "will feature some elements

Popular double major combinations at NUS

To broaden their knowledge, students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) can currently take a second major from a range of 35 disciplines.

These disciplines span different fields, from business analytics and geography to food science and mathematics.

An NUS spokesman said popular double major combinations among undergraduates currently at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science include:

- Life sciences and psychology

- Applied mathematics and economics
- Economics and statistics
- Economics and mathematics

She added that examples of contrasting double majors that current students have opted for include:

- Sociology and life sciences
- Data science and sociology
- Environmental science and philosophy

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of a US liberal arts education".

The common curriculum to be developed will draw on the strengths of both existing faculties, whose departments "have built a strong reputation for academic and research excellence" over the years, she added.

She said: "NUS has had successful experiences with delivering interdisciplinary studies in smaller settings, such as the University Scholars Programme, Residential College Programmes and Special Programme in Science."

NUS now wants to expand this model through the new college to benefit more students, she added.

NTU had earlier announced plans for a common core curriculum for

all undergraduates entering next August – except for those in its medical school.

The modules, which will take up a fifth of the academic workload, are meant to enable students to integrate knowledge across disciplines and develop skills in communication, digital literacy, enterprise and innovation, among others, NTU said.

Professor Tan Ooi Kiang, NTU's deputy provost for education, said the university has interdisciplinary programmes such as the Renaissance Engineering Programme, which blends engineering with business and humanities.

SMU provost Timothy Clark said its undergraduate curriculum al-

ready offers a high level of flexibility. "Our students may enrol for courses across schools regardless of the degree programme they are enrolled in," he said.

Most SMU students graduate with a second major, a second degree, or both.

Professor Clark said SMU has common core modules that form 33 per cent of its undergraduate curriculum, and the university has also launched initiatives for students to work in multidisciplinary teams to address actual industry problems.

Recruitment experts said having both specialised and soft skills is necessary in today's job market. They added that an interdisciplinary education can help graduates be more flexible and open-minded as they solve real-world problems.

Mr David Leong, managing director of human resource consultancy PeopleWorldwide Consulting, said the larger college planned by NUS should promote flexible study combinations 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 Dua, managing director of recruitment firm CareerBuilder Singapore, said employers are increasingly looking out for skills and aptitude over qualifications.

"A person with a diverse or interdisciplinary education offers more chances for him to experiment in his career," he said.

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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 DON JASON TAN, on the National University of Singapore's plans to bring together the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Faculty of Science to form a College of Humanities and Sciences.

BALANCED PERSPECTIVES

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