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More accept places at NUS schools making curriculum shifts

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More applicants this year have accepted the National University of Singapore's (NUS) offer of undergraduate places for interdisciplinary learning, despite doubts being raised about such courses.

NUS said that this year, 71 per cent of the students whose top choice was for one of four schools shifting to interdisciplinary learning, accepted the offer of places.

Last year, the average acceptance rate was about 66 per cent.

These numbers were for the College of Humanities and Sciences (CHS), which brings together two schools – the arts and science faculties – and also for the School of Design and Environment and the en-

gineering faculty, which now practise interdisciplinary learning.

NUS president Tan Eng Chye who gave the figures, also said that almost one in three of the 32,000 applicants to NUS this year listed the courses offered by CHS as their first choice.

He said that contrary to doubts expressed by some, these figures show that students welcome NUS' overhaul of its curriculum.

This overhaul enables students to integrate knowledge across disciplines and encourages them to mix and match majors across schools.

It will see 2,200 students entering CHS this year and taking common modules in areas that cut across different fields of study, such as design thinking, artificial intelligence (AI) and scientific inquiry.

A third of the students' overall

curriculum will comprise such modules, which focus on the intellectual approaches and connections across disciplines. Other topics include Asian studies, computational thinking and community and engagement.

Students will also take two higher-level interdisciplinary modules of their choice.

The same approach has been adopted for the 2,000 undergraduates entering the engineering and design disciplines, with a new common curriculum that bridges these two domains. The intention is to cultivate students who can think, design and problem-solve in an integrated fashion.

Professor Tan said that unlike in the past, when graduates could specialise and go into careers related to their training, now they have to be prepared for multiple career changes.

He said they are also graduating into a world of "wicked problems", which defy single-discipline solutions, citing Covid-19 as an example.

Prof Tan also elaborated on the flexibility for students to combine courses from across schools.

"A CHS student, for example, may start off wanting to major in mathematics, but after taking up the common curriculum courses, his interests may change and he may want to pursue economics. He can do so, but also choose to take up both mathematics and economics."

"That's the kind of flexibility that we are giving," he said, stressing that with graduates facing many career changes, it is useful to have at least two specialisations.

Prof Tan said that besides interdisciplinary learning, NUS will also emphasise experiential, entrepreneurial and cross-cultural learning.

"We will continue to encourage our students to study or take up work stints abroad – of course, as soon as it is safe to do so," he said.

Another major initiative is on enabling lifelong learning. NUS' Lifelong Learners programme offers students enrolment for 20 years,

from the point of admission as an undergraduate. "The message we are giving is that the first four years is just the start," said Prof Tan.

Former Hwa Chong Institution student Ian Ng, 21, who is entering the engineering faculty at NUS next month, said that although he was always better in the hard sciences, he appreciates the need to be exposed to other disciplines.

"Even in junior college, I found economics and General Paper a lot more challenging, but I also gained a lot from those two subjects."

Under the engineering scholars programme, he will go on to study for a master's degree, within or outside of NUS engineering.

"I hear of my seniors going from engineering to a master's in technology management, or even business. It is good to have these open choices," he said.

Ms Serena Chew, 19, who is entering CHS, said: "I am keen on science, but also philosophy, because I am very interested in looking at the ethical problems thrown up by the use of technology, such as AI."

"Frankly I never thought such a combination would be possible in one degree."

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