

NUS, NTU casting net wider with aptitude-based admissions

They are increasingly looking beyond grades to assess a potential student's suitability

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The university admissions period is ongoing, and applicants from polytechnics and junior colleges (JCs) are awaiting the results of their applications.

The good news for them is that in 2024, both the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) are casting a wider net to consider more applicants through aptitude-based admissions, where achievements and talents outside of academics are considered.

The two universities are increasingly employing a broad set of qualitative assessments, including interviews, aptitude tests and portfolios, to assess an applicant's potential beyond his or her grades.

They also take into account achievements in sports, arts, entrepreneurship and volunteer work. For students who have experienced

setbacks, they ask how these were overcome.

NUS and NTU took in the bulk of the 18,500 students admitted into the six publicly funded universities in 2023, with NUS taking in more than 7,400 freshmen and NTU taking in 6,400 students.

NTU said that in 2023, more than half – 57 per cent – of its freshmen were offered places based on aptitude-based admissions. This was up from about a third of students, or 38 per cent, in 2019.

NUS declined to provide figures on the proportion of its freshmen in 2023 who were accepted through aptitude-based schemes. It would only say that the number increased significantly compared with five years ago.

The university said it has also expanded its holistic admissions process by introducing special schemes aimed at identifying applicants with specific talents and aptitudes. One of the first schemes, launched in 2019, is the Polytechnic Entrepreneurship Pathway nomi-

nation scheme, where NUS asks the five polytechnics to nominate students who display a strong entrepreneurial inclination during their diploma studies.

NUS said that over the past few years, it has launched similar nomination schemes, for example, to identify JC students who have demonstrated strong aptitude for computing despite facing exceptional circumstances or challenges. In 2023, NUS introduced a scheme for polytechnics to nominate students with potential in social work. In 2024, it is expanding the scheme to include JC students.

NUS dean of admissions Goh Say Song said that since 2023, NUS has asked all applicants to respond to five short questions, including questions on their proudest achievement and what is meaningful to them. He said prior to that, students were asked to include a personal statement, but it was optional.

Professor Goh said: "So, currently, if a reasonably good student falls short in some way, we will go back and look at the responses to the five questions. In this way, we are giving more students the opportunity to be considered beyond their

57%

Percentage of NTU's 6,400 freshmen in 2023 who were offered places based on aptitude-based admissions. This was up from about a third of students, or 38 per cent, in 2019. NUS declined to provide figures. It would only say that the number increased significantly compared with five years ago.

grades, using broader criteria."

Officials from both universities stressed that aptitude-based admissions do not mean that they do not take academic grades into account, as admission dons still look at whether an applicant will be able to handle degree studies.

Applicants also have to meet the minimum grades for subjects related to the course of study. To study mechanical engineering at NUS, for example, an H2 pass in mathematics or further mathematics is required. For law, at least a B in General Paper is needed.

Explaining why NUS is going beyond grades, Prof Goh said: "Aca-

demical grades can only tell you so much about a student. Through the interviews, portfolios and aptitude tests that NUS uses, the university can assess their interests and aptitude for a particular field.

He added: "We are also keen on those with talent in the arts or sports. It adds to the vibrancy of the NUS student body."

NTU provost Ling San said aptitude-based admissions enable NTU to assess a bigger pool of students with a wider range of academic abilities, and offer places to those whose strengths are better aligned with the university's academic offerings.

Professor Ling said: "For the university, aptitude-based admissions benefit the wider student community by allowing for greater diversity on campus and fostering inclusion, enthusiasm and excellence."

Two NTU freshmen who were selected after having gone through aptitude-based admissions said they were grateful that Singapore's two biggest universities are increasingly applying broader criteria in selecting students.

NTU undergraduate Edwin Chew, 24, who is in the Singapore

men's national handball team, was glad that his university took into account his sporting achievements when considering him for a place in the maritime studies degree course.

"I started playing handball in Secondary 1 and have grown to love the sport. And I am proud to be part of the Singapore team that won medals at some significant competitions, including the SEA Games. I never thought that one day my sporting achievements would land me a place in a university when my results fell slightly short of the entry requirement."

Ms Nishaa C., 24, who did poorly in JC but excelled in her polytechnic studies after her A levels, said NTU took into account how she overcame the challenging circumstances she faced to go on to do well at Republic Polytechnic. She also stood out for her contributions to community involvement projects at the polytechnic.

"I did poorly in JC because I had to work to help support my family, which meant that I had little time for my studies. But I did much better at Republic Polytechnic, although I had to work daily at my father's hawker stall to help him. So, although my grade point average was a little below the entry score for the Bachelor of Science degree, they took into account my family challenges, as well as the community involvement projects that I was involved in," she said.

"If not for aptitude-based admissions, I would not have had the opportunity to show that I am deserving of a place in NTU."

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