

NUS college a move in right direction

Singapore's higher education scene received a welcome shake-up with the announcement that the National University of Singapore (NUS) would be bringing together two of its faculties to form a new interdisciplinary college next year. It has been proposed that the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences be brought together with the Faculty of Science to form the College of Humanities and Sciences. The move is a step in the right direction. University students deserve an education that crosses disciplinary divides in an age when the economy requires workers who can think out of single methodological boxes, no matter how sound and time-hallowed they might be.

Both NUS faculties date as far back as 1929, and

they are well regarded for their pool of specialisations, from psychology and history to mathematics and life sciences. However, there is urgency in the need to preserve subject specialisation but to also make it a part of interdisciplinary teaching and research. The objective would be to produce graduates who possess core skills and knowledge while remaining adaptable to changing conditions of life and work. The hard contours of scholarly inquiry in the natural sciences provide the conceptual microcosm of a world defined by a finitude of resources. The humanities and the social sciences offer imaginative and ameliorative solutions for some of the harsh perennials of the human condition. Both approaches are required.

According to one analysis of interdisciplinary learning, it boasts four advantages. It encourages students to recognise bias, think critically, tolerate ambiguity, and to acknowledge and appreciate ethical concerns. It is not that young adults are unfamiliar with the divergent nature of human needs. However, the exclusive structures of academic disciplines might make them favour one view of the world over others. To think critically is to acknowledge the bias that is inherent in preconceived notions and to be alert to ambiguity, or the presence of alternative perspectives on social issues. Since some academic disciplines might treat moral concerns as being subjective and therefore secondary, ethical considerations draw attention

to moral thinking in the minds of students in an interdisciplinary atmosphere where no subject enjoys a privileged position over others.

It is heartening that universities in Singapore, as do many abroad, already have courses that straddle disciplines so as to offer undergraduates a broad-based education. The liberal arts approach, popular in the United States, is a promising one because it obliges students to break out of disciplinary silos, such as the pure humanities or the hard sciences or the social sciences. In the process, they develop both specialised and soft skills that are necessary for survival and success in the job market. Singapore must keep abreast of changes in global education.