Wanted: Graduates able to see the connections in a chaotic world

Universities are pushing for interdisciplinary curricula to better equip their students for a future of increasingly complex challenges.

Amelia Teng

Education Correspondent

In the past, many arts students would fear data presented to them, while science students would shy away from writing literary essays.

But today, the arts and sciences may not be the polar opposites they seem to be – in fact, there are points where they cross over into each other.

This is happening amid growing awareness that to truly appreciate the challenges posed by the climate crisis and public health, an understanding of different disciplines is needed to find solutions to what are, by their very nature, multivalent problems.

In response, across the world, universities, which traditionally separate the study of humanities and sciences, are experimenting with more flexible ways of learning, to prepare graduates for this new world.

BRIDGING DIVIDES

In Singapore, the National University of Singapore (NUS) plans to bring together its Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science to form a College of Humanities and Sciences.

The plans are approved by the university’s board of trustees, which could likely accept students next August, for the 2023 academic year.

As part of a transdisciplinary common curriculum, students will take modules in different disciplines across the humanities, sciences and engineering, as well as in business, law and social sciences.

Students in both colleges will also have greater flexibility and more choices, while the wide range of subjects across both faculties, Professor Chan Hoe Yew, NUS senior deputy president and provost, said those plans build on the university’s experience in interdisciplinary training in the past 20 years.

In the past 20 years, he added, NUS had exposed small cohorts of students to the idea of thinking across disciplines, through their habits of thought beyond their academic specialisations.

This has also evolved into a range of offerings such as the University Scholars Programme (USP) and the University Town College Programme, which emphasise multidisciplinary learning, with students from different disciplines.

Similarly, some universities in Singapore have encouraged students to broaden their perspectives and draw connections between different fields.

Rajoo, associate professor at the Singapore Management University, said in a conversation, the situation is no different from other universities around the world, where students often find themselves at a crossroads, trying to integrate different disciplines.

"It is to make them more adaptable and engage with interdisciplinary knowledge and skills, while also equipping them with better problem-solving skills," he said.

But the key is to ensure that students are also able to explore different fields and programmes, and be able to integrate them, he added.

"The idea is to give them a broader, more holistic perspective on issues of the day and to be able to see the connections in the chaotic world that we live in," he said.