

# Find your 'element' to pick the right course and university

In this second of the AskST series on university education, *The Straits Times* looks at how to pick the right institution and course of study

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**Q** It is good to have a choice of six local universities, but what should my son look out for in making the choice, other than ensuring that the university offers the computing degree course he wants to pursue?

**A** Computing is a good course to study, given the rise of Industry 4.0, which refers to a new phase in industrial revolution that focuses heavily on interconnectivity, automation, machine learning and real-time data.

Several public universities offer degree courses in computing. So, how do you pick the right one?

First, look at whether your son is able to meet the cut-off score for computing, as it is highly competitive.

For the National University of Singapore (NUS), which has Singapore's largest intake of students for computing – with more than 1,400 last year – students generally need four As to enter the course.

Having said that, many students, including those at NUS, are admitted into computing despite falling short of the cut-off score.

Often, they demonstrate their aptitude for and interest in the field through other means, be it in the interview process or through some software they may have created.

NUS provost Ho Teck Hua feels it is important to recognise that developments in computing are rapid. Therefore, his advice is to pick a university where teaching and research in the field are at the cutting edge.

How do you ascertain that? One way is to look at the international rankings according to disciplines.

NUS, for example, was ranked ninth in the world last year for computer science and information systems by Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), where significant weightage is given to research output.

Your son should study the job and salary prospects for computing graduates in the yearly survey results, which were released on Friday last week.

Professor Ho suggests that those who aspire to work for the big technology companies also look at which companies hire from the universities to which they are applying.

In the case of NUS, that information is available from the Centre for Future-ready Graduates. Some of the top 10 employers of NUS' com-



Students at the National University of Singapore playing frisbee on the lawn. In choosing a university, it is vital that prospective students research the institution's ethos and student life as well as course content.  
ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE



The NUS School of Computing has Singapore's largest intake of students for computing, with more than 1,400 accepted last year. PHOTO: NUS

puting graduates last year included Shopee, ByteDance, investment banking firms JP Morgan Singapore and Goldman Sachs, and governmental bodies such as the Government Technology Agency.

You should also note that quite a few computing graduates go on to launch start-ups, if not work for one.

If your child is entrepreneurially inclined, it would be best to select a university that has a strong entrepreneurship programme.

Four out of the six universities have good programmes to nurture entrepreneurs. NUS has the reputable NUS Overseas Colleges

located in different parts of the world, including Silicon Valley, which has produced many up-and-coming entrepreneurs.

Prof Ho says that if your son wants to study other majors in addition to computing, it may be good to pick a university with a comprehensive selection of courses.

NUS, for example, has a slew of new majors and minors, and has introduced more elective modules to give students the option to pursue a second major, a minor or even engage in experiential learning through internships in Singapore or abroad.

At present, prospective students

can choose from 90 double-major and 105 major-minor programmes. Prof Ho says NUS wants to encourage students to pursue double-degree programmes, so they can graduate with degrees in two different fields – perhaps one aligned with their professional strengths or aspirations, and another with their personal interests.

**Q** I have been looking at the university rankings to help my son and daughter, who will be applying for university this year. My son wants to head overseas, while my daughter wants to study locally. Are rankings useful? What about subject rankings?

**A** Rankings are useful in that they give a general idea of a university's international reputation. But they have many limitations.

For one thing, the rankings of universities vary from one league table to another because they use different criteria. So, if you are going to consult the tables, please note the criteria used.

What may be more useful are the subject or discipline rankings and the leading international rankings, such as QS, which rank universities based on disciplines.

That said, you should never base your university choice entirely on rankings, as they cannot give you the full picture of what it is actually like to study at a university.

I recommend that your child

spend time researching the university's ethos, student life and course content – as well as checking the admission requirements and costs.

You might find that a university which is not so highly ranked – or not ranked at all – is the best fit for your child.

**Q** What about job prospects – how important is it to take into consideration the salaries and job prospects that follow the completion of a course?

**A** Prof Ho's advice is that if a student wants to ensure good job prospects, he or she should study a field that is popular and do well in that course while also developing soft skills. Study the results of the latest graduate employment survey to understand the job and salary trends.

Also, choose a university that emphasises career preparation. All six universities here have programmes to prepare students for work. NUS' Centre for Future-ready Graduates offers a wide range of courses, networking sessions, internships and career planning workshops to give graduates a head start.

**Q** My daughter's interests are varied, so I am having a difficult time helping her decide on the university course that suits her. Everyone says to follow your passion, but what if someone is not good in the area he or she is passionate about?

**A** Can I refer you to Ken Robinson's book, *Finding Your Element*?

In the book, he guides people on finding their "element", the sweet spot where natural talents meet personal passions.

So, to be in your "element", it is not enough to do something you are good at. Many people are good at things they do not enjoy. To be in your "element", you have to love what you are doing as well. As Robinson points out, passion is the driver of achievement in all fields.

Some people love doing things they do not feel they are good at. That may be because they underestimate their talents or have not yet put in the work to develop them.

Either way, passion allied with even moderate talent, will generally get you further than a strong talent with little enthusiasm.

I have had young people asking me if it is realistic that everyone can turn his or her passion into a job.

Some people can make a living from being in their "element", as defined by Robinson, but not all. "Finding your element" is not only about how a person makes money, but also about whether you find your job fulfilling and purposeful.

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• For more stories on how to help your child succeed in school and life, go to the Smart Parenting microsite at [str.sg/smartparenting](http://str.sg/smartparenting)



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