

Are universities using new labels on their old programmes?

In this third of the series on university education, The Straits Times answers your questions on interdisciplinary learning and the value of global exposure and work internships

askST
you ask. we answer.



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Q My daughter is good in the humanities and has no interest in Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. She was all set to go to the National University of Singapore (NUS) to study philosophy, but now, she is not sure, after the university announced its plan to get all students to take up interdisciplinary courses. I am also worried about her job prospects if she takes up philosophy. How should I advise her?

A I wish someone would do a study to track what happens to philosophy graduates in Singapore – the kind of jobs they get into and where they stand 10 years later compared with their peers. Unfortunately, I have not come across any such surveys. But I have come across many successful people who had majored in philosophy in university. They are often well read and write well.

My feeling is that philosophy is a good discipline to study – it provides students with strong mental skills that are generally applicable and prepare them for a wide range of careers – virtually anything you care to name – consultancy, civil service, foreign affairs, teaching, film-making and even jobs in technology companies.

Another point I would like to make at the outset – although NUS is introducing an interdisciplinary common core for those entering the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science, your daughter will still be able to study philosophy at NUS, which has a strong tradition.

Q What is the difference between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning? Are universities just putting new labels on its old programmes?

A There is some confusion because the two terms are used interchangeably.

But the difference is – multidisciplinary learning refers to people from different disciplines working together, each drawing on their disciplinary knowledge.

Interdisciplinary learning, on the other hand, requires you to integrate knowledge and methods from different disciplines, to form a framework of analysis that will lead to a rich understanding of complex questions.

I forwarded your question to NUS president Tan Eng Chye, who has for a time argued for more interdisciplinary learning, and he gave a good example of political philosophy as an interdisciplinary course that has been offered for years by NUS and many universities around the world.

Political philosophy can be defined as philosophical reflection on how best to arrange our collective life – our political institutions, our social practices and our economic system. So, you do not study politics and philosophy as separate subjects, but rather bring them together in answering questions such as “How can one person ever justifiably claim the authority to govern another person?”

As to your question on whether universities including NUS are just applying new labels to their old programmes, Prof Tan acknowledged that NUS has experimented with various interdisciplinary learning initiatives over the past 20 years, including the Special Programme in Science, the University Scholars Programme, the University Town College Programme and Yale-NUS College.

But only a limited number of students were enrolled in these programmes.



(Top) The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science at the National University of Singapore.

(Above) NUS president Tan Eng Chye mingling with students before the Covid-19 pandemic. PHOTOS: NUS

He added: “Now, with the College of Humanities and Sciences, or CHS, NUS will be offering distinct interdisciplinary curriculum at a much larger scale, to more students. The CHS is the result of two of our largest and most established faculties – the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science (both set up in 1929) – coming together to provide an enhanced undergraduate experience for our students. The curriculum and structure have been carefully curated to enrich and equip our students to meet the challenges of the uncertain, volatile and globally connected world that we now live in.”

Now, it may be useful to clarify how exactly CHS will deliver interdisciplinary education.

The college is set to enrol 2,000 students in August and these students will be able to choose any of the 28 majors previously offered by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science.

After four years, students will

still graduate with a bachelor's honours degree in arts, social sciences or science. But a key difference is that they will have to take 13 common modules in areas that cut across different fields of study, such as design thinking, artificial intelligence and scientific inquiry.

The number of required modules for majors will be reduced to make space for the common curriculum modules.

Students will spend a third of their overall curriculum on such modules, which will focus on the intellectual approaches and connections across disciplines.

They will also take two higher-level interdisciplinary modules of their choice. Again, the aim is to integrate knowledge across disciplines.

It is important to note that the interdisciplinary courses aim to give students an understanding of the approach used in different disciplines. Digital literacy, for example, does not aim to turn students into coders. Rather, the aim is to

help them understand the logic used in information processing. Knowing the basics of coding can open a window to understanding and using tech skills more broadly.

Q Why the need for interdisciplinary learning?

A This is what Prof Tan had to say: “NUS is seeking to groom its students to be agile and flexible in their thinking. Through interdisciplinary education, students will learn to integrate knowledge, insights and skills across disciplines and environments. Students will be able to understand various perspectives and be more proficient in presenting informed solutions to multifaceted problems.”

He cited Covid-19 as an example of a multifaceted problem. It is more than a medical issue, with a broader impact on society, politics, the economy and the environment.

“To even try to understand it, much less solve it, requires integrating knowledge, skills and insights from different disciplines – besides medicine, health economics, social psychology, epidemic modelling, materials science and an understanding of political context are all essential and must work together to save lives in a pandemic,” he said. He stressed that young adults will graduate into a world of more such “wicked problems” – issues that are ill-defined, mutate all the time and defy single-discipline solutions.

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