

# Falling enrolment in NUS' arts and social sciences faculty

Higher entry demands, pressures to study subjects with better pay among reasons

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Fewer students are opting to specialise in arts and social sciences at the National University of Singapore, with enrolment at the faculty shrinking by nearly a third since 2019.

The faculty had around 6,400 undergraduate students and was NUS' largest during the 2019/2020 academic year – a number which fell to around 4,400 in 2024, enrolment records from the university's website showed.

Numbers were relatively stable for the prior six years, climbing steadily from just under 6,000 in 2014 to around 6,400 in 2020, before starting to decline.

Students, experts and NUS staff *The Sunday Times* spoke to said that the falling Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) enrolment could be due to changing student demands, pressures to study subjects which will lead to better pay and career progression, and higher entry requirements.

The dip in enrolment at FASS coincided with rising numbers at the Faculty of Science (FOS).

Since 2020, FOS undergraduate enrolment climbed from about 4,100 students to nearly 5,300, an increase of about 24 per cent.

The two faculties have since December 2020 come together under a new administrative body known as the College of Humanities and Sciences (CHS). CHS students share a common core curriculum across the two faculties, and are able, with some exceptions, to switch majors between faculties and take modules from both.

Overall, the total enrolment at NUS for full-time undergraduates

has risen, from 26,797 in 2014 to 31,827 in 2024.

In response to queries from ST, NUS said it is seeing greater interest from prospective students for programmes such as computing, artificial intelligence, data science and analytics.

First-year enrolment in these programmes in NUS has increased by about 20 per cent from 2021 to 2023, it said.

There has been a "corresponding recalibration" of enrolment for arts and social sciences programmes – down by about 10 per cent – with enrolment in the pure sciences remaining largely constant, it added.

NUS added that more students from other disciplines are pursuing arts and social sciences as a contrasting area of study, as it scales up flexible and interdisciplinary learning.

It said: "The number of second majors and minors in arts and social sciences increased by about 20 per cent among graduating students from 2022 to 2024."

Locally, the trend of falling enrolment in arts and social sciences appears to be confined to NUS. Data from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU) showed their undergraduate numbers for the arts and social sciences to be largely stable over the same period.

NTU had around 4,600 students annually over the past five years, while SMU had about 1,000 students in both its social science and economics degree programmes in each of the past 10 years, data from the universities' websites showed.

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At Harvard University, the proportion of humanities majors has fallen to 20 per cent in 2012 from 36 per cent in 1954.

In Britain, there was a public outcry two years ago after Sheffield Hallam University announced it would stop offering its English literature degree due to lack of demand.

The transition to CHS has raised the bar for entry into FASS, said NUS staff and students.

One staff member, who declined to be named, said getting into CHS requires higher A-level scores than FASS used to demand, meaning that prospective humanities majors may not be getting into the school.

The staff added that there have been fewer students taking basic humanities modules every year since CHS was established.

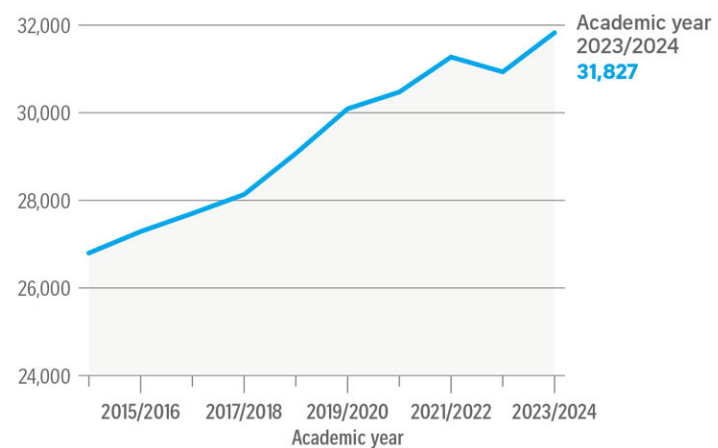
Applicants need a minimum of one A and three Bs at the A levels to enter CHS, data from the NUS website showed.

This works out to a score of about 78 rank points, assuming C grades in general paper and project work.

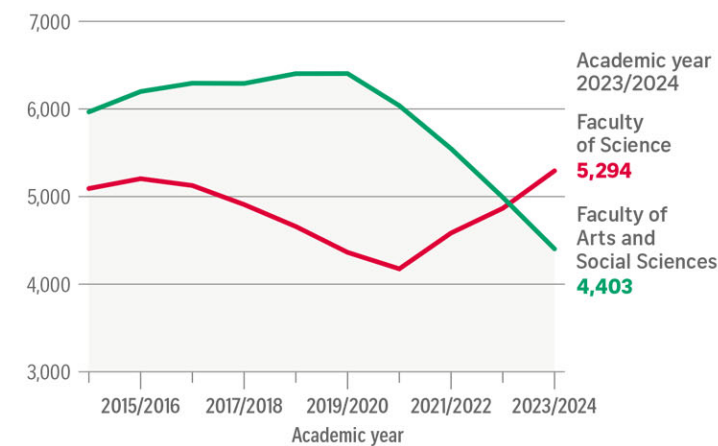
## NUS enrolments

Enrolment in NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences has fallen by about 31 per cent since 2019. Meanwhile, total undergraduate enrolment at the university has continued to climb over the same period.

### TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLMENT



### ENROLMENTS FOR FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Source: NUS SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

This is higher than the three Bs and one C – or 75 rank points – required in 2019/2020 for entry into FASS.

NTU undergraduate Lauren Tan, 20, did not get into FASS with a score of 78.

The second-year English literature and linguistics student, who applied to both universities in 2023, said: "When I got my grades, I thought they were around the required score to get into FASS, which in the past was between 73 and 75, but I did not get in."

Aside from changes to the school's structure, falling FASS en-

rolment also could reflect long-held perceptions that arts and social sciences qualifications lead to less secure or lucrative employment outcomes.

NUS said students choose to take up university programmes based on a mix of factors such as aptitude, interests and aspirations, along with considerations like market demand and employment prospects.

Digital technology, driven by advancements in artificial intelligence, is emerging as a mega trend and game changer reshaping industries and economies, it added.

MP Patrick Tay, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, said the trend indicates more prospective students opting for programmes that would enhance their chances of landing a job upon graduation.

He said Singapore's economy has seen in past years greater industry needs for information and communication technologies, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem), and professional qualification programmes.

He added: "In the same vein, with cross faculty module options becoming a norm, students in those programmes can also attend selected modules in FASS to enhance their knowledge or gain an understanding in specific areas."

More NUS students are choosing to attend other schools within NUS, said an NUS staff member who spoke on condition of anonymity.

This includes the School of Computing, which has seen its enrolment skyrocket from about 1,500 in 2014 to over 5,000 students in 2024.

Employment prospects sit on the minds of students, especially when picking their majors, said FASS second-year undergraduate Teo Hsin Yeong, 23.

The linguistics major, who is also doing minors in theatre studies and South-east Asian studies, said one of the reasons he picked linguistics over literature, aside from his aptitude and passion for the subject, was that it seemed clearer to employers what skills the degree would entail.

NTU second-year student Charles Toh said perceptions that Stem subjects are more crucial to Singapore's economy and offer greater job security and prospects were amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic struck Singapore in 2020, when most current university students were making up their minds about which degrees they wanted to pursue.

Mr Toh, who is studying English and philosophy, said: "We heard a lot about layoffs and downsizing during Covid, and the sense that you can easily secure a job after graduation is no longer around."

The 21-year-old, who got into FASS but decided to go to NTU because he felt that the programme had fewer common modules, said: "There are now so many degree holders, it is now quite arbitrary and secondary to attributes like passion, interest and competence in the field."

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