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NUS to open new residential college with a focus on AI

Acacia College will open its doors in August to its first cohort of 100 first-year students

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More students will get to live and learn on campus, as the National University of Singapore (NUS) opens another residential college at University Town in August.

Acacia College, its fifth such residential space on campus, will open its doors to its first cohort of 100 first-year students across all disciplines for its two-year programme. It will be the first college in NUS to focus on artificial intelligence (AI), and will be located on the premises formerly occupied by NUS College (Cinnamon Wing).

In the first year, the new residential college will also house 100 second-year students to support its activities and mentor freshmen.

It will have a total of 600 students by August 2026.

Associate Professor Heng Cheng Suang from NUS' School of Computing will head the new college as its master.

With this, the number of NUS undergraduates staying in residential colleges will grow to about 2,800, the university said in response to queries. This is up from the current 2,250 undergraduates across the current four residential colleges.

This figure makes up around 7 per cent of NUS' undergraduate student population, and is separate from those who stay on campus in other facilities.

Unlike the university's six halls of residence, residential colleges have a two-year academic programme where students from different disciplines come together and read interdisciplinary courses in small-group sessions at the college.

For example, students residing in the College of Alice and Peter Tan – the second NUS residential college that opened in 2012 – learn about community engagement, while those residing in Ridge View Residential College, which opened in 2014, learn about sustainability and workplace readiness.

Residents in the new Acacia College can choose from single rooms or six-bedroom apartments, with or without air-conditioning. It will provide spaces for meetings, dining, laundry, recreation and sports.

The rates for a single room will be about $200 a week, excluding meal plans. This is similar to the fees for two others – College of Alice and Peter Tan, and Tembusu College.

Associate Professor Leong Ching, NUS' vice-provost of student life, said in a reply to The Straits Times that in the last five years, the application rate for residential colleges has grown by 27 per cent.

In 2024, 2,528 applicants vied for a place in one of the four colleges at NUS, up from about 2,300 in 2023.

There were 1,025 available places across the four residential colleges for each student intake in 2023 and 2024.

Prof Leong said Acacia College fills an important educational need by asking the fundamental question of what makes us human, by exploring various aspects of human-machine interactions.

Prof Heng said students will have to take courses in digital literacy to acquire some AI knowledge in order to facilitate discussions.

In addition, all first-year students will be required to take a junior seminar course designed to foster critical thinking and expose them to issues related to humans versus AI.

Prof Heng said students from different disciplines can offer varied perspectives on a single issue.

"Non-computing students can highlight concerns beyond technical aspects, while computing students can provide insights into the technical feasibility of proposed or desired solutions," he said.

Ms Lynn Leow, a fourth-year psychology student, has been a resident at Residential College 4 (RC4) since she entered NUS in 2021. She is now a resident assistant overseeing students under the senior retention programme, which allows students to stay in the residential colleges beyond the two-year duration.

Residents of RC4 study systems thinking, a process that involves understanding how things, as a system, influence one another.

While it initially seemed like a "far off" concept for an arts student, she told ST that studying systems thinking as part of the curriculum requirement at her college helped her to look at things from a broader perspective.

"Instead of viewing my patients as just someone with mental health issues or struggles, I can take into consideration their family structures, how they are positioned in their communities and how that influences their current mental state," she said.

Alongside the opening of Acacia College, NUS will be introducing a new AI Talent Scholarship for 20 freshmen in four full-time undergraduate degree programmes: artificial intelligence, computer science, robotics and machine intelligence, and business artificial intelligence systems.

Starting from the 2025 academic year, scholarship recipients will receive priority admission to Acacia College, full coverage of subsidised tuition fees – after a tuition grant from the Ministry of Education – annual allowances for on-campus accommodation and living expenses, and a travel grant for overseas programmes.

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The National University of Singapore's Residential College 4, one of the university's current four residential colleges. The new Acacia College will be NUS' fifth such residential space on campus, and will be located on the premises formerly occupied by NUS College (Cinnamon Wing).
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