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NUS College receives record 10,000 applications for 400 places

The huge demand reflects strong interest in liberal arts education amid global AI shift

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Even as Yale-NUS College graduating students and alumni lament the closure of their beloved institution in June, they can take heart from the fact that a liberal arts and sciences education is very much in demand among young people in Singapore.

This despite the worldwide shift towards artificial intelligence (AI) and computing degrees, alongside falling interest in liberal arts and general studies.

NUS College – built on the foundations of the Yale-NUS College and University Scholars Programme – received a record number of about 10,000 applications in 2025 for the 400 places it offers every year.

In 2022, when it opened for applications, 7,000 applied.

An NUS College spokesman said the incoming cohort along with the first three batches form a diverse community comprising more than 30 nationalities.

Of the 360 students who have already accepted places in the college for the coming academic year, starting in August, more than 30 are from local polytechnics.

The rest of the Singaporeans come from all junior colleges, as well as Millennia Institute, the Singapore Sports School, School of the Arts and NUS High School of Mathematics and Science.

The college said there is also diversity in the socio-economic backgrounds of the incoming students, with about 40 per cent of those who are Singaporeans eligible for needs-based bursaries, which are based on their household income.

The college offers a programme rooted in the interdisciplinary study and application of the natural sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities.

Students take the college modules concurrently with their main degree requirements and are expected to contribute actively to learning within the small class sizes of 20 to 25. They are also required to live for two years in the residential wings of the college.

Experiential learning takes place on field trips for courses such as those on marine conservation and heritage, through interaction with industry partners, and via practicums in storytelling, photography and dance.

Through the college's Impact Experience projects, students form interdisciplinary teams to work on projects across Singapore, the region and beyond.

Three projects are now being incubated to develop longer-term value, including Bamboobon, a bamboo sustainability initiative in Thailand, which won the NUS x Hult Prize 2025, a global competition where university students develop social enterprises to address world issues.

Mr Nor Ilhan Anakin, 21, who will be pursuing a computing and AI degree, said combining it with a liberal arts education will give him an edge when he heads out to work. PHOTO: PAN PACIFIC ORCHARD

Professor Simon Chesterman, dean of NUS College, said of the surge in applications: "It reflects a growing appetite for an education that combines intellectual rigour with real-world relevance. We are candid to applicants that our programme is not easy and it's not for everyone. The demand that we are seeing tells us that students don't just want a degree – they want to be challenged."

On 40 per cent of the Singaporean students qualifying for needs-based bursaries, he said: "Access and excellence must go hand in hand. We want the best students, not just the best-resourced ones."

Asked about university-bound students around the world questioning the value of a liberal arts education in the age of AI, Prof Chesterman said: "In an age where machines can increasingly do what we once thought uniquely human, the case for a broad-based education is stronger than ever."

Incoming students echoed his comments, saying that a broad-based liberal arts education will give them an edge in the age of AI.

Ms Angel Lim, 18, who intends to major in sociology, sees liberal arts as being more relevant in the age of AI.

She said: "AI raises a lot of issues, and you would need clear and critical thinking to understand the issues and see a way forward. I believe a liberal arts education will inculcate that sort of thinking in me."

She is also of the view that AI will force humans to double down on those talents and skills that only humans possess – such as creativity, empathy and cultural agility.

Ms Naomi Ho, 20, a business studies graduate from Ngee Ann Polytechnic who is aiming for a degree in accountancy, hopes to pursue a career that will take her around the world.

To prepare for this, she is bent on making full use of the opportunities for global exposure and project work at NUS College.

She believes a liberal arts education will prepare her for going out into the world, adding that she is glad to see a diverse student body at NUS College, with students from different countries and education pathways.

She said: "There is value in an environment where you get opposing views and different perspectives – it's the best way to prepare yourself for a globalised world."

Former Raffles Institution student Nor Ilhan Anakin, 21, who will be pursuing a computing and AI degree, said combining it with a liberal arts education will give him an edge when he heads out to work.

Mr Ilhan, who is working as a receptionist in Pan Pacific Orchard to gain people skills, said: "No doubt AI will dominate every aspect of our lives. I feel that learning how to use AI will be the easy part. The difficult part will be using it well to benefit people and dealing with the complex issues that comes with using AI.

"That's where a liberal arts education will be useful. It will enable me to see the big picture, to question and look at issues with a different lens, before arriving at solutions.

"I strongly feel that in the age of AI, a liberal arts education can equip individuals to become effective 'translators' between AI and humans."

Dr David Leong, managing director of recruitment company PeopleWorldwide Consulting, said university-bound students combining a liberal arts education with their main areas of study are on the right track, as employers will value individuals who can leverage AI as a tool rather than a replacement for human ingenuity.

He said: "A liberal arts education excels in cultivating important skills, emphasising not just what to think, but how to think – encouraging curiosity, ethical reasoning and the ability to evaluate information critically."

Asked about opportunities for NUS students who failed to get into the college, the NUS College spokesman said the university has expanded its interdisciplinary education initiatives, and its experiential programmes – including the NUS Overseas Colleges programme for those with an entrepreneurial bent – are open to all.

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