‘Teach less, learn more’ now at NTU

Fewer classes, more overseas exchange trips for new intake

BY AMELIA TAN

FEWER classes, more overseas exchange trips and a greater emphasis on broad-based learning.

These are just some of the changes in store for this August’s new intake at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

Its leaders hope the revamped programmes will help undergraduates develop into rounded personalities with a social conscience, a love for learning and great leadership skills.

The changes were based on recommendations of a high-level committee convened by the university in 2007.

NTU’s undergraduate curriculum will be reduced by up to 14 per cent, or by three to four core discipline modules. This will give students more time for group-based learning and self-reflection.

Students will also take at least two more elective modules from a larger selection of subjects, and have the chance to pursue new minors in areas such as energy, environmental and urban studies, and sports science.

They will have to take a new compulsory course in environmental sustainability – on top of the existing compulsory courses of communication skills and Singapore studies.

The changes were outlined for reporters yesterday by NTU president-designate Bertil Andersson and Professor Er Meng Hwa, the senior associate provost in charge of undergraduate education.

Professor Andersson, who takes over as president in July from Professor Su Guanming, will lead the implementation of the changes.

Prof Er said the changes reflect the direction of Singapore’s education system, which has adopted a “teach less, learn more” philosophy. In recent years, the system has placed more emphasis on nurturing “soft skills” such as self-confidence and innovativeness.

He added that the revamp is geared towards nurturing five attributes which the university wants to see in its undergraduates. They are: an upright character, smart leadership, a social conscience, having a creative and enquiring mind, and being an avid learner.

Leadership, in particular, is an area which Swedish companies based here say Singaporean students lack, said Prof Andersson.

“(The Swedish companies) say they actually employ them for the lower ranks, because the Singaporean students are fantastic at doing what they are instructed to do. But they are actually not good at leading information and driving the processes themselves,” he added.

NTU hopes to cultivate leadership skills through initiatives such as a new dual-degree engineering programme which aims to groom students to become heads of organisations.

Students on this programme will graduate with a degree in engineering science as well as a Master of Science in technology management in 4½ years. They also get to spend a year at a top university overseas, on top of internships in California’s Silicon Valley.

To support the changes in its curriculum, NTU will move away from holding classes in large lecture halls. Instead, it will use tutorial rooms that allow for small group discussions, expand the range of online learning platforms, and encourage teaching staff who use innovative teaching methods, for example, by giving them grants.

Prof Andersson said implementing the changes will be difficult. The biggest challenge will be getting students, parents and teaching staff to buy into them.

Teaching staff and students interviewed have welcomed the changes.

Associate Professor Gan Chee Lip of the School of Materials Science and Engineering said: “Small group discussions are a good way to get students involved in classes.”

Second-year communication studies student Mark Tay, 23, said: “I am taking six modules this semester. I find myself rushing to complete my readings. It is quite taxing. By reducing the work load, I feel that students like myself will be able to spend more time on each module and gain more in-depth knowledge.”

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