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BOTH DISCIPLINES NEEDED TO TACKLE COMPLEX ISSUES

Social sciences, humanities key to Smart Nation drive: Professor

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SINGAPORE—Professor Alan Chan from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has seen colleagues from the humanities and social sciences faculty collaborating with those from other disciplines to examine issues of science and technology, or contributing to discussions on policy issues such as how science and technology may change human behaviour and the society's value system.

Such interdisciplinary exchanges may address, for example, how human relationships are affected when everyone is "glued to their handheld devices".

"This is not something engineers would be able to resolve on their own," Prof Chan, dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at NTU, said in an interview with TODAY. "Can such questions be simply answered by those who design and develop new phones? I don't think so. That's why our communications school works closely with colleagues from other schools and colleges in addressing these issues."

Technology and innovation may be the twin forces to power Singapore's new economy but increasingly, social

* ADMISSIONS OPEN FOR NTU'S NEW MASTER'S IN APPLIED GERONTOLOGY

● Nanyang Technological University (NTU) will be launching a Master of Science programme in applied gerontology, with its first intake starting classes in late July.

The graduate programme — designed for students preparing for a career in ageing-related fields or professionals who are working as service providers in these fields — is offered by NTU's School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Associate Professor Xiao Hong, the programme director, said that there have been "increased concerns" about the current and future supply of professionals prepared to serve the diverse needs of older Singaporeans and there is room for more professionals in the gerontology sector, given the rapidly ageing population here.

"Singapore is one of the world's fastest-ageing societies. Its changing population structure and long-term demographic shifts have enormous impact on every aspect of our lives," she said.

The course — which can take

up to 25 students in this year's cohort — is also Singapore's first such programme in applied gerontology, with an interdisciplinary Asia-focused curriculum that is grounded in theory and practice, allowing students to structure their studies based on their needs. And students will have to complete a practicum, where they may get to work with voluntary welfare organisations or in the healthcare sector.

Prof Alan Chan (picture), dean of NTU's College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, said, "The practicum is a very important component of this programme. We believe graduates of this programme will readily find employment in clinical and care-providing settings, as well as in policy-making settings."

Students may take a full-time or



part-time programme, with classes conducted on weekday evenings and Saturdays, NTU said.

They can also choose to take course modules in leadership and policy engagement or in clinical practice and care management, among others.

Commenting on the potential career options that graduates would have, Assoc Prof Xiao said that they may take on jobs in "a wide array" of industries, including healthcare, care management and public governance.

"The continued growth of the older adult population in the coming years will escalate the demand in virtually every career area for employees with gerontological knowledge and skills," she added.

Those interested should apply online via NTU's School of Humanities and Social Sciences by Feb 28. **ALFRED CHUA**

sciences and humanities are getting some unexpected attention and gaining importance in the workplace and helping policymakers as they tackle complex issues.

As such, from this year, NTU will split its humanities and social sciences disciplines into two separate schools: The School of Humanities and the School of Social Sciences.

Both will be housed under the college that Prof Chan heads, with the college also comprising the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, as well as the School of Art, Design and Media. Announcing this last October, NTU president Bertil Andersson said that while NTU is known as a science and technology university, the move would enable it to offer students a "wider breadth of learning and knowledge which will include humanities and social sciences".

He added, "Creative thinking is also needed for truly excellent scientists, engineers, mathematicians and other professionals who can solve complex problems by looking beyond their own fields of expertise."

A philosopher by training, Prof Chan — who hails from Hong Kong

and has been teaching in Singapore since 1991 — firmly believes that students in Singapore should move away from the mindset that a university education is just a means to acquire skills and secure a job. Instead, they ought to pursue knowledge for the sake of it, he said.

He stressed the importance of an interdisciplinary education and added that undergraduates who take this path would find themselves in good stead even in a challenging job market.

"It is precisely that we are growing as a smart nation ... that understanding society will become ever more important," he said. Giving the example of how the vision is that robots would take over jobs in the workforce, he added, "Do you simply focus on building robots, or do you also need to understand how different types of technologies will have an impact on society? That is what social sciences are particularly concerned with ... The complexities of any society will remain, regardless of how smart technologies may be."

Climate change, sustainable growth or inclusive growth, "these

are big fundamental questions and challenges that would require the concerted effort of all disciplines, and all approaches to come together to address," said Prof Chan, who was appointed to his current position in 2009. "There is now much wider recognition that knowledge does not grow well in insularity."

However, even as humanities and social sciences gain prominence, they still carry the same old baggage — that the graduate's job prospects will not be as bright or highly rewarded.

In Prof Chan's mind, it is an "unfortunate perception". "There are really no poorer cousins in the pursuit of knowledge if you are keen on addressing the serious questions and challenges facing the world today," he said. "More important than acquiring factual content knowledge in any particular course, it is the ability to learn new things on your own, (this is what we) want to cultivate."

An education in humanities and social sciences would enable students to think broadly. "You begin to understand issues. You begin to analyse data, you begin to acquire the skill to communicate your ideas effectively," he added.

Pressed on whether such a degree would get graduates jobs, especially in a lean labour market, he said that students in NTU would get "ample opportunities" for work experience. Both the college he is heading and the university hold career fairs, encourage entrepreneurship among students and promote international exposure through overseas exchange programmes. Some students also go on internships as part of their curriculum.

BREADTH OF LEARNING

Prof Chan, a self-proclaimed liberal arts education advocate who studied at the University of Winnipeg in Canada, said, "I felt that the local university curriculum over-emphasised examinations, and also specialisation in a particular subject. In some disciplines, students might end up doing the majority of their courses in one subject and only a few (specific) courses outside their major. That, to me — and I know there is still some debate about it — is not the best recipe for a quality education."

One major nod to the disciplines he champions is the establishment of the Social Science Research Council by the Education Ministry a year ago, with the council later receiving a boost of some S\$350 million in funds over five years — an "exciting development" to Prof Chan.

It shows that the Government is "looking at the next phase of the country's development", he said.