18th August 2009, 1700 hrs

Is a general arts degree a safer job option in today's uncertain world?

Presenter: Devika Misra

Local universities have been reporting a steady and significant increase in the number of arts and science applicants they have been receiving in recent years.

This year has been no exception, with the intake indicating higher demand from better-performing students.

Some believe that this is because these courses now offer safer employment opportunities like teaching or the civil services which are less prone to be affected by a poor economy.

But others say there is now a much wider recognition of the value of a liberal arts degree that has little to do with the state of the economy.

Devika Misra looks into the issue.

Used to be that when your parents urged you to study something useful...it meant a pre-professional degree.

So if you were smart....

Engineering, Medicine, science and technology, pure finance perhaps...

something that would ensure a steady job.

Today the links between education and employment are not quite so easy to read.

More and more students are opting for all round or more general degrees.

This... even in what began as a predominantly technological institution, NTU.

Professor Neil Murphy is the associate Chair of its School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

"Certainly there has been a change. There has been a pretty considerable increase since we started in 2004. In terms of A level applicants over the past three, four years we have seen sort of fifty plus increase to the whole college of Humanities and the school of humanities itself would be even more so I would think. Poly applications have increased by even higher numbers maybe as high as seventy percent plus."

Professor Tan Tai Yong is the dean of the Faculty of the Arts and Social Sciences at NUS.
He says that the increased popularity can be tangibly measured using a number of different criteria.

"First the number of applications that we have been receiving this has increased quite significantly. Secondly the number of strong students who are applying; people with quite good grades this has resulted in raising of our cut off point and thirdly, the number of students who indicate the arts and social sciences as their first choice. Perviously people would apply to the popular faculties first: law, business, medicine, science engineering and if they cant get in they will put arts as a second or third choice but this is no longer a fall back option."

So what is the new interest due to?

Well... a combination of things.

More educational opportunities in the humanities for Singaporean students for one.

Also, a growing confidence on the part of students to follow their interests regardless of employment opportunities.

But most of all, experts say, a growing recognition of the skills and value inherent in studying the arts rather than pursuing a pure science or technical degree.

Professor Murphy says that the arts disciplines involves teaching students to think for themselves in a more focused way.

"It is different. The overwhelming commitment to the thinking process, to creative thinking is not quite the same I mean. So this is not being critical of technical skills. Technical skills are to some degree less fluid because you cant vary from given facts when you're working in a technical environment. Civil engineers can benefit from the infusion of humanities and social sciences skills into their education. University education in the liberal arts is based on questioning received wisdom and trying to work in a very creative way with received wisdom. Very closely linked to that of course is the commitment to developing communication skills both verbal and writing."

And it's not only students who are realising the value of these skills.

Increasingly it is employers as well.

Professor Tan points out that increasingly arts graduates are finding themselves a far wider range of job opportunities than just teaching or the civil service.

"Employers are now open so they're not looking for only one type that you must have a professional degree, therefore we will recruit you. They are realising that humanities and social sciences students do bring with them certain skill sets which are relevant and important. When we speak to prospective employers, we speak to alumni they tell us we're not looking for students with certain particular sets of knowledge, or sets of skills, we're looking for people with a kind of open ness of mind, the critical thinking skills, the analytical thinking skills, the cultural
sensitivity, the high levels of E.Q."

He says the value of these qualities and skills will only get greater over time and is unrelated to the current economic downturn.

"You're seeing a change in the way the employment or the labour market functions. In the past, perhaps fifteen twenty years ago people who graduate will probably go into one job and is likely to stay in that job for a long period of time, sometimes for the entire career. But now you're going to see people changing jobs very regularly, re inventing themselves as new challenges, new opportunities surface. So you're going to see a young graduate go through four or five jobs before he or she reaches the age of forty. Then the person who's versatile, who's broad minded, who's able to re invent himself over and over again will have the edge."

So there are apparently no clear cut safe guarantees anymore in terms of job options.

Arts and science graduates are find themselves competing for the same jobs.

So what should you study?

Well if you don't really love any one thing...some academics say that inter disciplinary courses are now more popular than ever before.

These should teach a student to integrate and analyse knowledge from different fields and this will be key in the new economy.