

The Straits Times says

Ensure grads fit demands of the economy

In an interesting development, students joining the Singapore Management University (SMU) from 2023 will be able to take their pick from several hundreds of courses and customise their major. The university announced plans for a College of Integrative Studies (CIS), which will take in up to 100 freshmen from August next year.

In what is a first for a local university, these undergraduates will have an "individualised major". They can select all modules across SMU's six schools – accountancy, business, economics, computing and information systems, law and social sciences – and they will graduate with a bachelor's degree in integrative studies after four years. This academic pathway goes beyond exist-

ing interdisciplinary programmes by leaving it to students to define their own disciplines to suit their interests and career aspirations.

This is a good idea in principle. Academic institutions around the world have been focusing on interdisciplinary studies as a way out of the strait-jacket of orthodox disciplines whose provenance lies in times that have become outdated. This is not to say that those disciplines themselves have become irrelevant: Mathematics or physics or history can never become irrelevant. However, the application of mathematical, physical or historical knowledge now is tied up with the emergence and evolution of other disciplines and methodologies that did not exist in the heyday of those tradi-

tional disciplines. Even relatively "modern" disciplines such as sociology do not have immutable borders but must contend with the spillover of intellectual ideas from neighbouring disciplines. This being the case, there is little reason why individual students should not be allowed to tailor a major to reflect the interdisciplinary range of their diverse and eclectic academic interests. What holds true for universities must also hold true for their students.

In practice, however, a cautionary note is in order. It is one thing for experienced academics to decide on the scope and depth of an interdisciplinary course, and quite another for students to draw up individualised majors. CIS students,

whether on the professional track or a research track, must be expertly guided by faculty, as laid out in plans for the initiative, so they meet minimum standards of academic breadth and rigour.

Ensuring this would help to remove any misperceptions among employers that an individualised major was tailored to meet personal choices at the expense of academic quality. Such impressions could affect the job prospects of such graduates. Of course, bosses do look for graduates with cross-disciplinary boundaries. But companies need to be sure that aside from having a sufficiently deep foundation in the subjects pursued, those whom they employ can also meet the needs and demands of the industry and economy.

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