The road to flexibility in changing majors

NUS and NTU more stringent on transfers; SUTD, Yale-NUS let students specialise later

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Silicon valley and lifelong learning are now buzzwords in the higher education landscape, with universities vying among themselves to offer bite-size offerings to cater to adult learners.

But at the undergraduate level, there is also enough flexibility built into the university curriculum to accommodate those who may have discovered new passions midway through their programmes.

The Yale-NUS College, for instance, is part of the National University of Singapore's management school's board of trustees' chairman Ng Kong Fong made a call for more flexibility in Singapore's university system.

Given that most universities here follow the British system of requiring students to declare on their major when they apply (except Singapore University of Technology and Design, which allows students to declare a major only after the first year), majors change midway through courses.

One bigger university such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) are more stringent. However, overseas and smaller institutions that were established in collaboration with American universities -- Yale-NUS College and the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) -- only require students to choose their course of study at the end of their first year.

While students at SUTD have to declare their majors by the end of their first year, after taking common modules in subjects such as design, science and mathematics. At Yale-NUS College, more students have to declare their majors only at the end of their second year.

SUTD's director of admissions Lin Fei Feng said that such an approach allows students to make more informed decisions, so that they can consider their interests in other subject areas.

"In the past, we were teaching them to be experts, now we teach them to be problem solvers. If they are not happy with their major, they can change it," he added.

The number of Singapore students who wish to change their course of study is higher than the number of students who actually change their course of study.

"At Singapore University of Technology and Design, it is somewhere around 15-20 percent of students who actually change major," said Dr. Ng. "But we have a lot of students who express interest in changing major."