

NUS takes bold move to curb obsession with grades

It is rolling out a 'grade-free' system in phases for its freshmen

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IN A bold move by the National University of Singapore (NUS) to reduce the obsession with grades, how its freshmen perform in exams may no longer count in their final mark.

The initiative, already in place at its medical school, will be rolled out in phases to other faculties, which could include law and engineering, from as early as this year, revealed NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan.

Details are still being worked out for what NUS has called its "grade-free" system, which will be extended to the whole school over the next few years. But while there will still be tests and exams, first-year students will no longer get A to F grades.

Instead they will just be given a distinction, pass, or fail in their modules – and these will not form part of their Cumulative Average Point, which determines the quality of the degree awarded at the end of their course.

"We think that it is important to reduce some of the over-focus on grades as the most important thing to go for, as opposed to actu-



NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan says "it is important to reduce some of the over-focus on grades as the most important thing to go for, as opposed to actual learning". ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

ally learning," Professor Tan told The Straits Times last Friday. "Grading – in terms of Pass or Fail – will still occur. But this is really to help students know where they are in relation to a subject."

NUS, which has the biggest intake of freshmen among universities here, currently has about 6,900 full-time first-year students.

The move to take some pressure off freshmen, who typically take on 10 modules, and help them cope with university life, comes amid a broader shift towards an education system less fixated on grades. Top universities, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), have already gone "gradeless", Prof Tan pointed out.

At the Singapore University of Technology and Design, which partners MIT and took in its first cohort in 2012, Term 1 students get a "pass" or "no record" in each subject and there is no Grade Point Average (GPA) given. In Term 2, students receive A, B, C

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NUS president appointed chair of prestigious global forum

IN A boost for Asian universities, National University of Singapore (NUS) president Tan Chorh Chuan has been appointed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as chair of a prestigious forum of university leaders.

From this year, he will head the Global University Leaders Forum (Gulf) for a two-year term, taking over from Professor Richard Levin, the former head of the renowned Yale University.

The group, which comprises the heads of 25 top universities, was created by the WEF in 2006 as a platform for academic leaders to engage their peers from other sectors in high-level dialogues.

It also debates and discusses major trends in higher education and research, such as the impact of online learning on universities.

Members of the "invitation only" group include top universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, as well as leading Asian institutions such as Peking University and the University of Tokyo. NUS is one of six Asian universities in the group, and the only one from Singapore.

Prof Tan, 54, who has been

involved in the forum since 2008, when he was appointed NUS president, said: "It is a great honour to be chair of such a distinguished gathering of university presidents. It recognises NUS' standing as a global university... and Singapore's overall prominence on the global stage."

One of the likely topics on Gulf's agenda this year is whether online learning has delivered on its potential, said Prof Tan, who is in Davos, Switzerland, for WEF and Gulf meetings.

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He noted that free massive open online courses, called "Moocs" in short, have a high dropout rate, with just 6 per cent of participants seeing them through.

"Many Moocs also do not result in a certificate or degree from the university," he said. "This is an area which would have to develop over the next few years before they can take off in a very big way."

Prof Tan revealed that NUS, which already has a partnership with Coursera – a key provider of Moocs – is in the midst of finalising plans to work with overseas universities in online learning.

An announcement is expected later this year. ONG HWEE HWEE

Freeing up students to go beyond books

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or “no record”, but only passing grades are used to calculate their GPA.

While the Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University do not have a similar policy for first-year students, several courses are graded on a pass-fail basis.

By doing away with grades, Prof Tan hopes that freshmen can venture out of their comfort zone and take on more “exploratory” type of courses.

This would also free students to go beyond books and “spend time to develop their personal qualities which are not so easy to grade”.

While there are concerns that students may be less motivated to study if they are not graded, the experience at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, which piloted the grade-free scheme in 2010, showed otherwise, said Prof

Tan.

“Students are more collaborative, and there is a greater focus on actual learning,” he said.

NUS’ medical students now go “grade-less” for their first two years.

“You gain a degree of freedom to explore non-academic pursuits... It also helps to reduce unhealthy competition,” said 20-year-old second-year medical student Nicole Lee, who has time for co-curricular activities and community work.

But she admitted that some of her peers may feel insecure without a letter grade to show how well, or poorly, they are doing.

“Some may ask: What does it mean if I get a ‘pass’? Is it a comfortable or borderline pass?”

NUS is also looking at revamping its General Education modules to provide a more well-rounded education.

Currently, students must



By doing away with grades, the National University of Singapore hopes that freshmen can venture out of their comfort zone and take on more “exploratory” type of courses. ST FILE PHOTO

take two of these modules, which include topics like Globalisation and New Media, as well as two “breadth” subjects which are outside their area of specialisation.

But some ended up choosing subjects they were already good in or feel confident of scoring in.

One way to address the

problem, Prof Tan suggested, is to “repackage” these subjects into categories, and make it compulsory for students to choose from each of these.

Pilot schemes are being planned for the new academic year starting August, but the revamp will take years to complete.

Said Prof Tan: “It may be

helpful for a student who is very good in literature to learn some quantitative techniques like statistics.

“The question is how do we encourage or ensure that students really learn in areas in which they are not so strong in but would be quite essential to them.”

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