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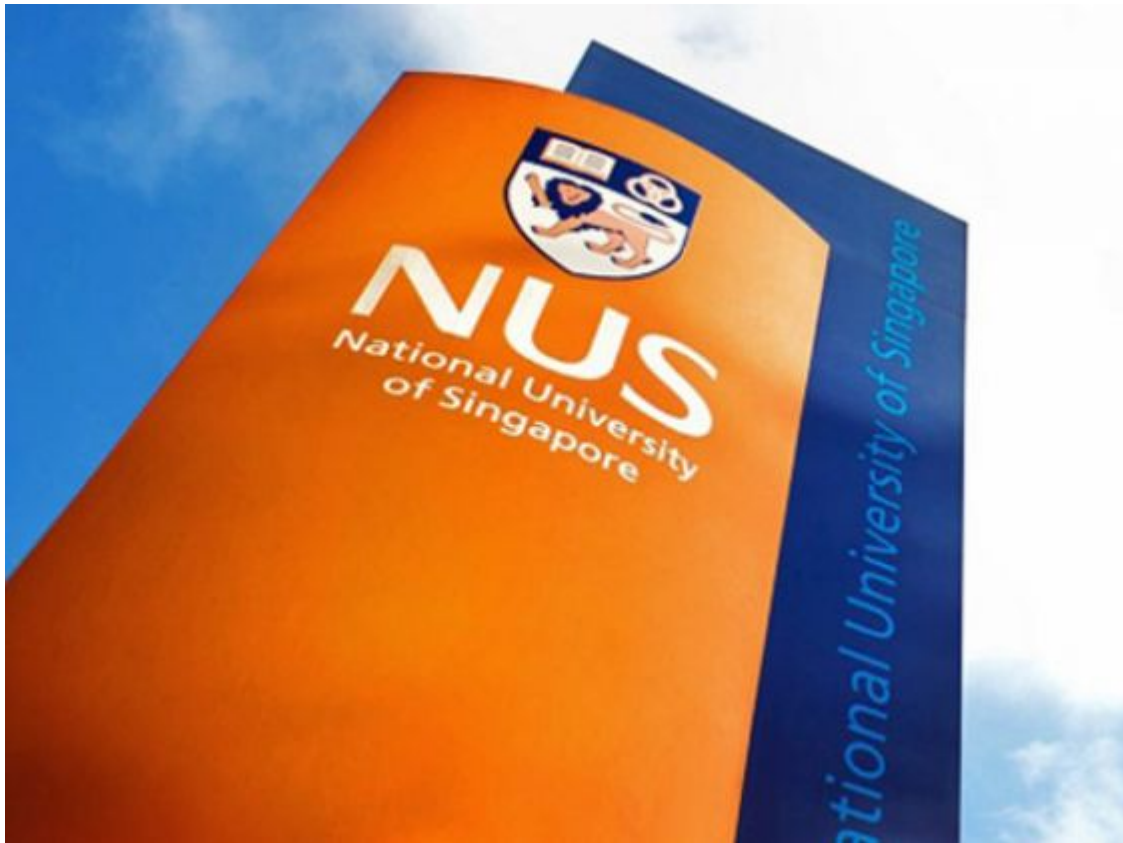
Headline: Spike in number of concurrent degree students at NUS, NTU

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These accelerated dual-degree programmes allow students to graduate with bachelor's and master's degrees in shorter time.

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BY LAURA ELIZABETH PHILOMIN



TODAY file photo

SINGAPORE — Amid growing demand and a better calibre of undergraduates, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) — the Republic's two largest public universities — have seen a sharp increase in recent years in the number of students enrolling in concurrent degree programmes.

These accelerated dual-degree programmes allow students to graduate with a bachelor's as well as a master's degree in as short as four-and-a-half years, instead of the normal route that could take between five-and-a-half and six years. They may also include a stint with prestigious overseas universities.

At NUS, the number of participants on its concurrent degree programmes — which allow students to pursue undergraduate and post-graduate studies at the same faculty or two different faculties, or with an overseas partner university — has increased from 10 in 2009 to about 100. Correspondingly, there are 25 such programmes today, up from 13 in 2009.

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A separate dual-degree programme — the Global Engineering Programme — for its top engineering students has seen the intake grow from 13 in 2009 to 40 this year. Applicants have to go through a rigorous interview process and the university received almost 400 applications this year.

Similarly, NTU's Renaissance Engineering Programme has increased its annual intake from 36 in 2011 — when it was launched — to 64 this year. Under this programme, participants will graduate with a Bachelor of Engineering Science degree and a Master of Science in Technology Management degree.

Professor Kam Chan Hin, NTU senior associate provost for undergraduate education, said: "Some students prefer to start work earlier as this gives them an edge in their careers, because it potentially means they are better placed for promotions or salary increases."

Professor Bernard Tan, vice-provost of undergraduate education at NUS, noted that the options to pursue an accelerated pathway were among the wide range of learning opportunities that the university offers.

Apart from being able to stand out from their peers in the eyes of prospective employers, students who are pursuing or have graduated from the concurrent degree programmes said these also offered them the opportunity to study in top overseas universities.

Mr Sean Chua, an NTU fourth-year engineering student who spent a year at the University of California, Berkeley, said pursuing a master's degree would prepare him better for the workplace by supplementing the technical knowledge he acquired in the bachelor's programme.

NUS law graduate Afzal Ali, 25, who was on a concurrent degree programme, did his Master of Laws in New York University Law School. The biggest takeaway was the chance to learn from practising lawyers during the master's programme, he said.

Last month, TODAY reported that fast-track private degrees are gaining popularity here. For example, some private institutions allow diploma holders to graduate with a bachelor's degree in as short as 18 months.

Via summer programmes or special terms, undergraduates at NUS, NTU and the Singapore Management University (SMU) can shave six months or a year off the normal four-year duration of a bachelor's degree programme.

SMU said about one in 10 of its students complete their undergraduate programmes in three or three-and-a-half years. It also offers a fast-track programme that allows students to graduate within four to four-and-a-half years with a Bachelor of Science (Information Systems Management) degree from SMU and a master's degree in information technology from Carnegie Mellon University.

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Professor Pang Yang Hoong, SMU vice-provost (undergraduate), said the university is not concerned about the minority of students who choose private education routes to a quick degree. She added: “Students coming to SMU are here to receive a holistic education rather than a quick means to a paper degree ... This is borne out by our annual employment statistics showing that SMU graduates are in high demand.”

The youngest public universities — the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) and the Singapore University of Technology and Design — currently do not have accelerated programmes.

* On what some private universities are doing in terms of offering fast track degrees, an SIT spokesperson said: “The term ‘fast track’ connotes that degrees are intentionally shortened or condensed — for example, modules might be collapsed, calling into question the integrity of the degree structure. As such, SIT does not put our students on a ‘fast track’.”