



Professor Lily Kong, Singapore Management University president (left); and Professor Elvin Lim, dean of the College of Integrative Studies (CIS), announcing plans for the new college at the university campus yesterday. CIS will take in up to 100 new students from August next year. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

# New SMU college to let students pick own individualised major

Move allowing them to cater to their interests comes amid growing emphasis on interdisciplinary learning

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Students joining Singapore Management University (SMU) from next year will be able to take their pick from several hundreds of courses

and customise their major.

The university yesterday announced plans for a new College of Integrative Studies (CIS), which will take in up to 100 new students from August next year.

In a first for a local university, these undergraduates will have an "individualised major". They can

select from 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.

Students enrolled in CIS can defer the declaration of their degree choice till the end of their first year, so that they have time to explore the range of disciplines available before making a more informed decision.

At the same time, they can reserve places in up to two SMU schools. After the first year, around 40 students will be admitted into the individualised major programme. If they decide not to take up this individualised major, they can opt to take up one of the two reserved places, or apply to transfer to another SMU programme, subject to the university's approval.

SMU president Lily Kong said: "The integration of disciplines and domains is how new knowledge is produced. We have set out to develop a new generation of graduates who will be able to combine knowledge domains, who can respond to industry disruption in multi-dimensional and non-linear ways."

The new college, she said, is ultimately about coming up with new solutions for issues by linking ideas across disciplines.

The move by SMU comes amid increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary learning in higher education – in August last year, the National University of Singapore admitted its first cohort of 2,100 undergraduates into a new interdisciplinary College of Humanities and Sciences.

Professor Elvin Lim, dean of CIS, said the integrative college model is new in Singapore, but has been implemented abroad in the United States, in places like George Mason University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

CIS currently has more than 20 faculty members from disciplines such as computer science, economics, environmental science and literature, who have worked on interdisciplinary projects.

Prof Lim said the college plans to offer more modules where faculty members from different disciplines will co-teach.

Professor Kong said that unlike for existing interdisciplinary programmes, SMU is leaving it to its students to define their own disciplines, to suit their interests and career aspirations.

"Because the world is not predefined, industry changes, global trends require new skill sets, the new workplace requires different skill sets... (All these) require that there be a cadre of students who are nimble, agile and able to self-direct their learning," she said.

At SMU, CIS students can select a professional track or a research track. Students on the professional track will have close exposure to industry and real-world problems. The research track will have a greater academic focus, and suit those with interest in research, government or policymaking careers.

Each student will be guided by a faculty adviser drawn from CIS or the larger SMU faculty in choosing his curriculum.

Students on the professional track will also be assigned an industry mentor, and be guided to come up with a major in response to an industry or societal challenge. Those on the academic track will be supervised through a dissertation to hone their research skills, in preparation for future work in academic inquiry.

Students in CIS may also take up an individualised second major with a smaller set of requirements if they wish. The second major will also have a professional and research track. This individualised second major will also be an option for other SMU students from August.

Prof Lim said: "We don't want to assume that this is for everyone – this is only for a certain type of student who has an interdisciplinary bent, who is a bit of a maverick, and interested in finding solutions to problems that are only starting to appear."

Prof Kong added: "Prospective employers tell us – it's not the major you do that matters. It's the ability to connect across the dots, to draw connections across disciplines, the ability to think critically – all of these things matter to employers, so this college is designed precisely to respond to that."

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