Poly grads hold their own in the arts

More are taking up humanities courses at NUS and doing well

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SENIOR WRITER

A SMALL but growing number of polytechnic graduates are turning their backs on traditional subjects such as engineering and taking up humanities courses at the National University of Singapore. Despite their practical educational background, they are studying more abstract disciplines such as economics, history, sociology and English literature. And they are holding their own against their junior college peers. Although the university does not specifically track their performance, every year, several go on to graduate with first class or second upper honours.

Reasons for their success could include the rising calibre of polytechnic students and the fact that they tend to work well with minimum supervision, said Associate Professor Paulin Tay Straughan, vice-dean for undergraduate studies in arts and social sciences. The faculty started admitting them in 2004 after several applied for places armed with diplomas in business, mass communications and law.

In the first year, it had only a handful of polytechnic graduates. But their numbers have since swelled to about 160, which make up 10 per cent of the annual intake of arts and social sciences students.

This is despite the fact that they have to undergo a more stringent process to get in. As well as taking into account their diploma grade point average and O-level results, the faculty makes them pass an English proficiency test, unlike A-level students who have already sat the General Paper.

Those with borderline grades have to go through an interview to convince a panel that they have what it takes to do well in arts and social sciences.

The polytechnic graduates who sign up come from backgrounds studying leisure and tourism management, business, mass communications and law. A few also make the leap from information technology or engineering.

They generally have grade point averages of at least 3.5 out of 4. Prof Straughan said diploma holders have certain strengths which make them stand out as a group.

“They are independent learners,” said the associate professor in sociology. “You can set them a task and they will get it done with minimal supervision.”

She also praised their street smarts and people skills. “A couple of my students are helping me with my research and they are very good at getting interviews done. They speak the language and are able to get people talking.”

Associate Professor Chang Tou-Chung, from the geography department, described polytechnic students’ “practical bent” as an advantage.

“Because of their training in the polytechnic, they are quick in realising the practical or applied value of what they learn and are good in applying it to real-world situations.”

Prof Straughan admitted that they may lack the knowledge base needed for subjects such as history and the polished writing of their junior college counterparts. But she added: “With a bit of coaching, they catch up fast and write well enough.”

Polytechnic graduates agreed that they are less confident about their writing – one of the reasons this group traditionally shines away from arts and social sciences. Yet they point out other strengths such as project skills.

Mr Bernard Chin, 26, who went from studying leisure and resort management to history, said polytechnic education is not as structured as the junior college curriculum.

“In that sense, it is similar to university education where you have to pick the modules you want to study, organise your time and your learning and be an independent learner.”

Sociology student Cheryl Hoon, 23, who assisted Prof Straughan in her research, said having to go out to do interviews for her polytechnic projects was good training for field research.

Mr Bryan Loh, 25, who is expected to graduate with at least a second upper honours in sociology, said: “It’s difficult for a poly student to get into National University of Singapore, especially into the arts and social sciences faculty. I had to go through a writing test and an interview.

“So when we do land a place, we are motivated and determined to show our junior college peers that we can be just as good as them.”

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