NUS online modules to give NSmen an early start

They can take 8 such courses from January before school starts in August

BY ONG HWEE HWEE, ASSISTANT NEWS EDITOR

NATIONAL servicemen starting school at the National University of Singapore (NUS) next year will get a headstart – without having to turn up in class.

For the first time, they can choose to take some modules online soon after they complete national service. They can do so from home in January, instead of waiting for school to start next August.

Eight courses – ranging from computing to philosophy – will be offered exclusively to them, as part of NUS’ push to combine online learning with classroom teaching.

The pilot programme is aimed at helping NSmen who may need a longer time to adapt to university life after being away from school for two years or more.

About 2,000 students will be eligible for the programme.

The online components – which will include lecture video snippets, pop quizzes and assignments – will be hosted on the platform of Coursera, a provider of massive open online courses, known as Moocs.

For the first three months, each course will be conducted entirely online, allowing the freshmen – most of whom would have completed national service by then – to learn in their free time.

They have to turn up for “real” classes only for the next three months, when they will have face-to-face sessions with professors and classmates.

Students will be expected to spend two hours on campus once every two weeks, but requirements may vary for different modules.

And they will have six months to complete the whole course, instead of just five weeks in a normal term.

At the end of the course, they will be tested the same way as those who took the module the traditional way.

The longer duration, and the online format which allows students to learn at their own pace, will help ease national servicemen into the academic environment in a “more gentle way”, said NUS provost Tan Eng Chye.

“We hope to give these students a headstart in university education as they are about two years behind their female peers,” he said.

While NSmen are now allowed to enrol in two special terms of six weeks each before school starts, the take-up rate is low as many feel that the pace is too hectic.

The online segment is free for students to try out, but if they decide to continue with the on-campus segment, they will have to pay about $746 per module.

NUS is in talks with the Education Ministry to allow students to use a cash award given to all NSmen to pay for the course fee.

More details will be given to students at a later date.

The initiative is one of the most ambitious attempts yet by a local university to combine online learning and classroom teaching.

Some universities, including NUS, are adopting the “flipped classroom” approach, in which students learn from pre-recorded lectures and other online material before coming to class for in-depth discussions.

Said Professor Tan: “The Moo platform cannot replicate the campus experience... However, with the introduction of Mooc modules, we can expect to have more engaging face-to-face sessions that focus on higher order skills and deeper engagement.”

Mr Lee Rian Chong, 39, who will be studying chemical engineering at NUS next year, is keen.

“I like the idea of not having to follow a strict timetable. It frees up my time to do other things,” he said.

The Temasek Junior College graduate, who intends to apply for an attachment with a research institute after NS, added Anderson Junior College graduate Lim Xiao Feng, 20, who will be studying science at NUS: “I can repeat or pause the online video if I find it hard to follow, but you can’t ‘pause’ a real lecture.”


Universities moving into online learning

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is planning to go online in a big way.

Apart from the eight modules offered exclusively to national servicemen, the university will also put up three other courses for current students.

A module on writing skills will be rolled out later this month, while the other two – in philosophy and engineering – will be offered next January.

These 11 modules will be exclusive to NUS students. In the first two months of next year, it will also offer three courses which will be free for all users of Coursera, a provider of open online courses.

NUS is the first Singapore university to partner Coursera, a California-based company.

Other schools on the platform include Brown University and Northwestern University.

Other local universities are also looking at online learning.

At Nanyang Technological University, “flipped” classroom teaching – where students attend lectures online and use class time to assimilate the knowledge – is already being tested.

The Singapore University of Technology and Design is in talks with its partner university, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to incorporate the latter’s online courses in its teaching.

NUS provost Tan Eng Chye said it plans to offer at least 10 modules online every year.

Rather than replacing university education, the trend of online learning has made classroom teaching more effective by getting professors to think more deeply about how they present information, said NUS lecturers involved in putting their modules online.

“There is no ‘real’ audience who can give immediate feedback. So you have to anticipate the response of the students,” said Associate Professor Chung Keng Yew of the department of physics.

Film-like lecture videos snippets that are only 10 to 12 minutes long also means that lectures have to be very clear and focused in their delivery.

That requires a lot more planning, such as including examples of common errors made by students, said Ms Susan Tan, deputy director of the Centre for English Language Communication.

And lecturers have to pay much more attention to details. Said Ms Tan: “There is no eye contact with students... so you have to make sure there is always a smile in your voice.”