

# How to land a place in university

Universities are increasingly basing their selection on more than just grades, such as getting applicants to write personal statements. And here is a tip – don't use ChatGPT



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## 1 Understand the big picture

First, the good news. In 2023, the six universities in Singapore had a record number of places – 18,500, which is 500 more than in 2022, according to the Ministry of Education.

The not-so-good news: In 2023, there were 38,000 unique applicants, or about two for every place.

Currently, around four in five A-level and International Baccalaureate graduates enrol in the universities, up from around three in four in 2015, figures show.

Many polytechnic graduates believe there is a quota to limit

university places for them. There is no such thing – admission is based on merit.

In 2023, around one in three of a polytechnic cohort landed a place in a local university.

Before the expansion of university places about 10 years ago, only about 20 per cent were successful.

## 2 University Admission Score system

A-level holders who have strong results and need them to secure a place would need to understand the University Admission Score (UAS) system that local universities use, where A-level grades are translated into points. There are changes announced on the score system, but they will not kick in until 2026.

For now, the maximum number of rank points remains at 90. Those with higher scores have a better shot at gaining admission. Many online sites provide an easy way to calculate your UAS points.

## 3 Take advantage of aptitude-based admissions

The universities are increasingly basing their selection on more than just grades, such as getting applicants to write a personal statement or answer a few questions.

One sample question from the National University of Singapore (NUS): "Tell us something you have done outside your school curriculum to prepare yourself for your chosen degree programme."

Some of you may seek help from friends who are better writers, or even ChatGPT. Please don't, however tempted you may be.

As NUS warns on its site: Do not use any external aid such as AI (artificial intelligence) or ghost-writing; doing so may have a negative impact on your application.

The Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), which uses holistic admission criteria, says: "Any work or personal statements submitted must represent the individual's effort, knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. It is thus the applicant's responsibility to appropriately attribute ideas and information from other sources, including those derived from using generative AI tools such as ChatGPT."

**(Artificial intelligence) can't replicate a student's personal thoughts and feelings about what their life aspirations and motivations are and what they hope to get out of a university education.**

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**MR JONATHAN KUA**, Singapore University of Technology and Design admissions director, on how technology such as ChatGPT may not be useful to applicants writing personal statements

Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) admissions director Jonathan Kua notes that AI "can't replicate a student's personal thoughts and feelings about what their life aspirations and motivations are and what they hope to get out of a university education".

SUTD also asks a series of questions to understand students better.

## 4 Achievements to highlight

Applicants should highlight medals won at International Olympiads or if they have represented Singapore in arts or sports competitions. In addition, include any active community service, volunteer work and leadership positions.

This information is also important if you are eyeing scholarships such as the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Talent Scholarship, a new award by the university to help students develop their talents in non-academic fields such as music, film-making, sports and community work.

If applying for anything related to computing, highlight any involvement in start-ups, digital projects, or creating an app or new software.

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GAVIN FOO

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# Good preparation matters

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**5 Acing the interview**  
Universities also use one-on-one or group interviews in selecting students. Take them seriously and dress appropriately.

It is a chance to show the university why you are deserving of a place in the course you are aiming for, and convince it that you can contribute to the campus community.

A couple of questions come up in almost every admission interview: "Why do you want to come here?" "Tell me about yourself?" "What do you want to study and why?"

It pays to prepare for the interview by practising answers to some likely questions and even doing some research, so you are ready if the question does come up.

For some courses, you may need to have a portfolio of your best work. This usually applies to courses in the arts. Those applying to study English Literature often have to discuss a poem or essay, while mathematics applicants may have to solve an equation.

SUTD's Mr Kua says all shortlisted students need to attend a 30-minute one-on-one interview that he refers to as a conversation.

"It's an opportunity for the university officials to figure out if the student is the right fit for the university, if he or she would benefit from an education at SUTD. Similarly, it is an opportunity for the student to understand what SUTD can offer and if it suits him or her," he adds.

He emphasises the importance of the interview: "Many times, we

learn things in interviews that we wouldn't have learnt from anywhere else in the application. It's an important part of holistic admissions and gives the applicant the opportunity to tell his or her story."

Singapore Management University's (SMU) director of admissions Linette Lim says: "I would advise our applicants to be authentic, to use their replies to show us their interests and values, and approach the entire application process to self-reflect and to connect with us, showing us their real selves and passions."

"Do not be someone whom you are not."

38,000

The number of unique applicants in 2023 for places in university. It worked out to about two for every place

**6 Take advantage of special admission schemes**

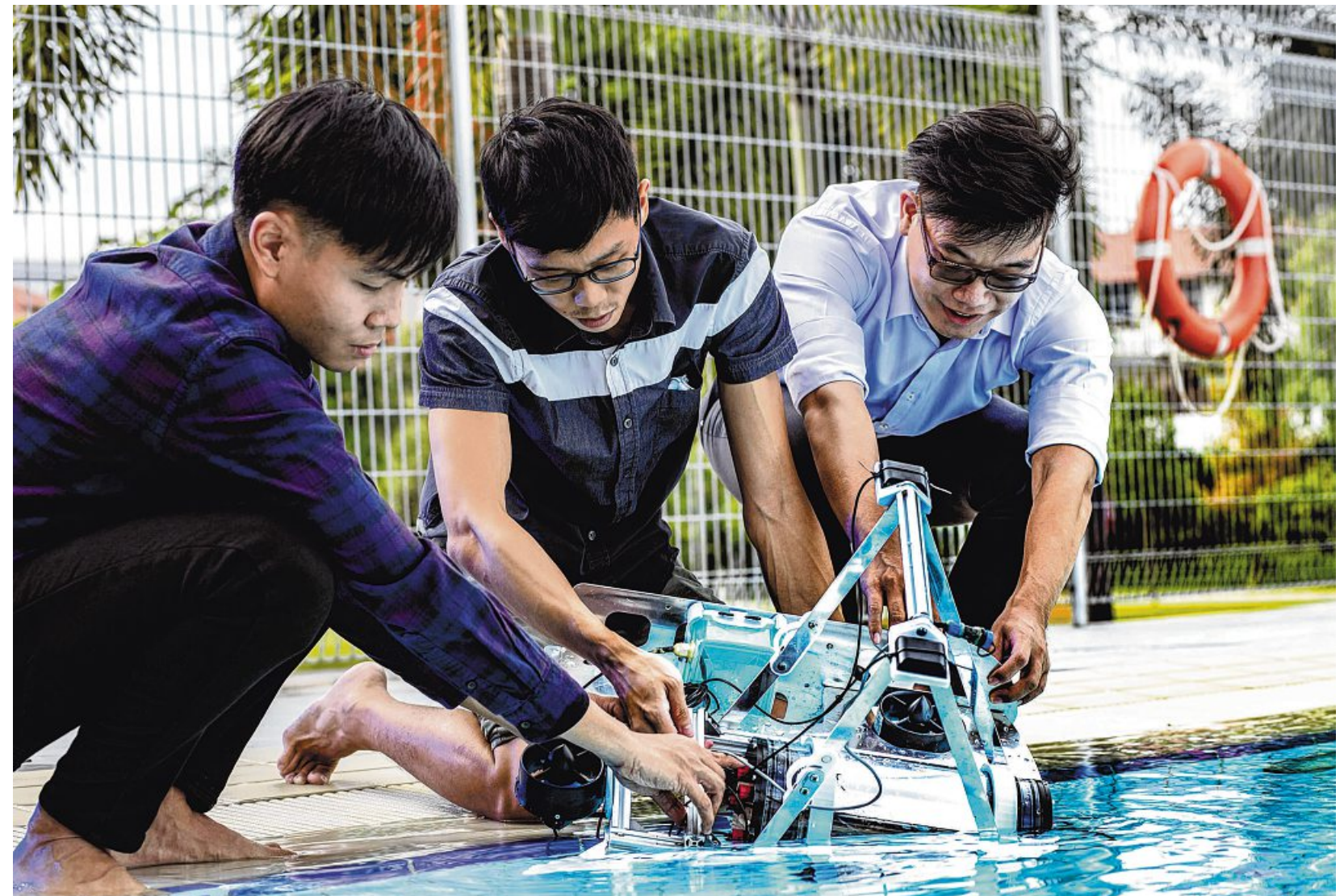
NUS has a special scheme to draw polytechnic graduates who are interested in entrepreneurship. It asks the polytechnics to nominate students who show this inclination, including those who have participated in entrepreneurship-related programmes.

SUTD offers the Poly-SUTD Pathway Programme for graduates from three polytechnics – Ngee Ann, Singapore and Temasek – who are interested in studying engineering at SUTD. Those selected can take the first-year course while studying for their diploma course.

NUS also has the first-choice bonus points scheme, which gives additional points to the first-choice programme of an applicant. This is aimed at helping students pursue their strong interest and passion in a specific field of study.

**7 Check out special programmes and learning opportunities**

NUS has the popular overseas



Singapore University of Technology and Design students working on an autonomous underwater vehicle for coral reef monitoring. The robot relies on machine learning to interpret what it "sees" underwater. PHOTO: SUTD

college programme, where students are sent to entrepreneurial hubs around the world for courses and work in start-ups.

Over the years, its graduates have set up successful start-ups, with a few, including marketplace platform Carousell, attaining "unicorn" status by reaching US\$1 billion (S\$1.34 billion) in valuation.

SUTD launched 42 Singapore in 2023, a tuition-free coding school, in collaboration with Ecole 42 Paris.

Instead of lectures and tutorials, the programme uses a unique peer-learning approach and offers project-based learning in a gamified environment to develop technical and soft skills needed for the industry.

**8 How to decide the best university for you**

While it is useful to look at overall placings and subject rankings of the universities you are applying to, it is more important to find one that is the right fit for you.

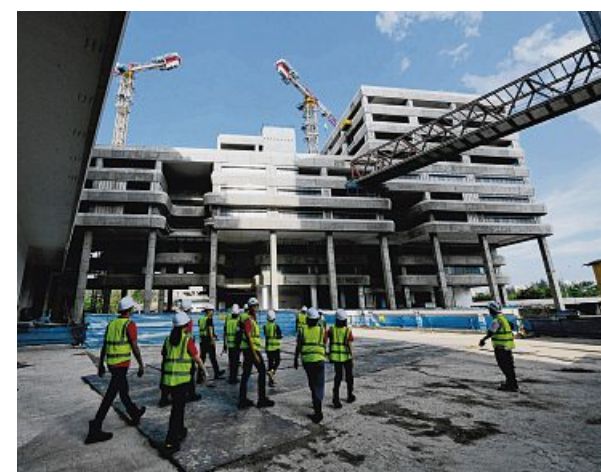
Consider its special features, its courses including special programmes and its student body, and ask yourself if this is what you want out of a university education.

NUS and NTU are comprehensive, research-intensive universities that offer a wide range of degree programmes. This allows their students to combine courses from different disciplines as joint degrees and second majors and major-minor pairings.

These educational innovations create greater flexibility for students to curate their own curriculum to suit their interests.

Both have also made a further push to broaden their students' learning through interdisciplinary learning.

NUS has set up the College of



The Singapore Institute of Technology's upcoming Punggol campus will be used by students in the later part of 2024. PHOTO: ST FILE

Design and Engineering, College of Humanities and Sciences, and NUS College, allowing students to build knowledge and competencies across fields.

If you are keen on a multidisciplinary engineering education, you can consider NTU's Renaissance Engineering Programme, which offers a curriculum that is unique and broad-based. It integrates engineering, science, business, technology management and humanities.

SMU's College of Integrative Studies (CIS), which opened in August 2023, gives students the option to individualise their majors with a selection from the university's entire suite of about 1,000 courses.

Students are encouraged to create a major that combines modules across different schools, for example, in AI and cognitive psychology for those aspiring to build the next generation of robots.

As CIS dean Elvin Lim says of the need for interdisciplinary education: "In a highly disrupted world, to be a single-subject expert is to risk obsolescence in the rapidly evolving industry cycles."

Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) has been introducing interdisciplinary modules to its degree programmes.

For instance, its hospitality students will take some engineering modules to understand basic robotics, digitalisation and automation – all of which are becoming more prevalent in the industry.

As SUTD dons say, in the end, students should consider a university's mission and if it fits with what they want out of a university education.

Mr Kua stresses that at SUTD, it is not just about graduating with a degree. From the moment students join, the university inculcates in them the spirit of innovation.

"We instil in them design-thinking skills, ensuring that they always look at problems differently. Our students don't attend lectures, they are constantly engaging in hands-on projects, which require them to apply what they learn onto real-world problems," he says.

"They do the majority of their learning outside the classroom, from their peers and in the many extraordinary experiences we put

them through – on campus, off-campus, in the community and overseas."

If you want diversity and flexibility, consider SUSS and SIT, which offer diverse degree pathways.

SUSS has a diverse mix of students, including fresh school-leavers, mid-career working adults and retirees. It is known for providing flexibility of learning through various modalities, whether on-site or virtual.

I have featured SUSS students who started as full-time students. But after going on a work internship, they decided to seize the opportunity of a full-time job offer from the internship company and switched to part-time studies.

SIT has a programme in which working adults can earn micro-credentials that can stack up to a degree.

The Competency-based Stackable Micro-credential pathway also enables workers to attain degrees in a shorter time, with prior learning gained from past credentials, industry certifications or work experience.

SIT and SUSS cater more to polytechnic graduates, not just in their applied learning approach, but also in their degree programmes, which are aligned to polytechnic diploma courses.

SIT's new campus in Punggol, which will be used by its students from the later part of 2024, takes the concept of applied learning further.

The new campus, occupying a total land area of 91,000 sq m – about the size of 13 football fields – will be a living laboratory that integrates applied research and innovation, while providing students with a real-world environment for applied learning.

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Singapore Management University has a College of Integrative Studies, which gives students the option to individualise their majors with a selection from the university's entire suite of about 1,000 courses. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

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