

MY THOUGHTS

A lesson or two from Dublin

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

TWO months have passed since I returned from a half-year-long exchange programme at University College Dublin (UCD) in Ireland to continue my course at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and I cannot help but compare them.

At first, I thought that UCD, as an advanced European university, would have student facilities comparable to those in NUS. Yet, NUS students have more advanced information technology and state-of-the-art resources at hand. The heavy investment in infrastructure at the newly built University Town, for instance, has provided students with an excellent study environment.

But there are other aspects of UCD that we can learn from. Take the example of module allocation. At NUS, students are expected to select modules which have predetermined examination dates. Suppose there are two particular modules that a student would like to read, but the exam dates clash: Well, tough luck, the student must choose.

At UCD, however, students select their modules first, and then the college administration designs an exam timetable in which none of the dates clashes. This allows for greater flexibility for students, who need not worry about conflicting exam dates.

While it is probably not currently feasible for NUS to change its system of allocating modules, perhaps the system can be modified in future.

After all, this difference between the universities reveals an underlying divergence in mindsets. At UCD, individuals are not required to fit the needs of the institution; rather, the institution strives to fit the needs of individuals.

Furthermore, unlike in NUS, the modules I read in Dublin did not employ a bell-curve grading system. I have observed that grading on a curve often promotes unhealthy competition. Students realise that the worse their peers do, the better their own grades.

Such a grading system is not necessary at UCD to motivate students to do well. I found it comforting to study in a culture

that does not regard students as competitive agents, but individuals to be nurtured during their academic journey.

Such a difference in academic culture bears significance given that, as an Irish friend once reflected, universities tend to reflect or even embody the national ethos of the countries they are based in.

If being *kiasu* (fearing loss) is a quintessentially Singaporean trait, does the pursuit of competitiveness in our universities compromise the ability of students to cultivate qualities like compassion and empathy?

When I was in Dublin, I was pleasantly surprised that some senior students regularly coached their peers in subjects they were weak in, completely free of charge, simply because they were friends.

In Singapore, I have heard of students who are reluctant to even lend their notes to others due to the possibility that others might do better.

It would be a step forward if, despite the bell-curve system, more of our students can look beyond their personal interests to help their weaker peers along.

We in Singapore often pride ourselves on our first-class education system, but there is still room for improvement. Perhaps, we can learn a lesson or two from Dublin, where a culture of camaraderie makes learning a pleasure.

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