NTU partners Imperial College to draw engineers

Students will spend a year at leading UK university under elite programme

By SANDRA DAVE

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For years, A-level students who did well in mathematics and science would dream of engineering and opt instead for medicine, business or finance, because of the lucrative careers offered in those fields.

This year, however, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) may have made a start in reversing the trend. It has managed to attract its first A-level students to engineering through its elite Renaissance Engineering Programme (REP), launched in 2011.

Now, NTU is adding to the appeal by signing one of the world’s leading engineering schools – the Imperial College of London – as an REP partner, with top-ranked University of California, Berkeley, already on the list.

Part of the draw of the REP, which combines the study of engineering with business and liberal arts, is that students get to spend a year at one of the partner universities before they take up internships at start-ups and companies abroad.

In the case of Berkeley, students go on to Interns with companies in Silicon Valley, the home of technology giants Google and Facebook.

Those heading to Imperial will get to work in top companies such as Rolls Royce in Britain.

Professor Teck Guan Lim, who heads the programme, said eight students competed for each of the 50 places available in the REP this year. One in three had three A* or A grades, which means they fall into the top 15 per cent of their age group.

He expects the competition for places to increase, as the opportunity to study at engineering at Imperial is highly coveted.

The school in London, which already has an annual intake of 3,000 engineering undergraduates, sees nine applicants competing for each available place.

Encouraged by the demand for the REP, which already has 174 students, NTU is looking into whether it can raise more funds to offer up to 26 more places a year in the future.

Prof. Teck said: “Imperial’s renowned reputation in Europe and the presence of key industry players such as Rolls Royce and IBM in London, will also benefit students when they embark on overseas internships.”

The aim is to nurture a new generation of well-rounded “renaissance engineers” – modelled after Leonardo da Vinci, the famed Italian painter, sculptor, engineer and inventor. They would then go on to hold top posts in companies.

NTU provost Freddy Boey said that as the world grows more connected, having global exposure and promoting cross-cultural exchange will help ensure that graduates can have international mobility in their careers.

As the world’s largest single-campus engineering faculty turning out about 3,000 graduates a year, NTU, he added, is aiming to bring the glories and excitement back to the discipline.

The materials engineer, whose inventions ran the gamut from the world’s smallest heart pump to retractable ticket gantry gates at MRT stations, said: “Sadly, students and parents think of engineers as repairmen. They need to realise that they are inventors and creators. Just about every modern invention in the world from the iPad to heart stems and solar energy have an engineer’s hand in it.”

Miss Victoria Zhao, a first-year REP student, is excited about the possibility of having Imperial College as a choice for her year of study overseas.

“That would mean having exposure to London – the largest financial centre in the world,” she said. “This is a very attractive factor for me if I decide to specialise in financial engineering.”

Meanwhile, Professor Debra Humphris, vice-provost (education) at Imperial, said the college was honoured to partner NTU, adding that the move would strengthen its own student body in engineering.

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