CHAPTER 2

KNOW THE NUS UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT

As you are probably aware, Teaching Assistants (TAs) at NUS come from a variety of backgrounds. Some may have attended local universities while most would have attended universities in other countries. To develop a teaching style that would be effective at NUS, it is important to realise that NUS may have very different demographics from your own undergraduate college, and it would be in your best interest to get to know the main characteristics of a typical NUS undergraduate student.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is a leading global university in Asia. It is Singapore’s flagship university which offers a global approach to education and research, with a focus on Asian perspectives and expertise. NUS has a large student population of about 30,000, 30% of whom are international students. The university offers quality education that equips its undergraduates with the knowledge and skills needed in the marketplace. But more than that, it aims to nurture in its students the ability to think critically, learn independently and communicate effectively—all the essential skills they need to have a successful lifetime of multiple careers.

NUS undergraduates are generally competent and motivated individuals who had been admitted on the strength of their excellent ‘A-level’ (junior college) results. Whilst generally hardworking, they are also known to be pragmatic, i.e. they can be highly “examination-driven” and influenced more by factors such as grades and endorsed materials (e.g. recommended readings, ‘good’ handouts). Understanding this should help you to prepare appropriately and adjust your teaching methods to retain student interest and enhance their motivation. While the “achievement orientation” tendencies of NUS students may seem less preferred than the ideally preferred “understanding orientation”, NUS students are known to be able to rise up to any challenge that is placed before them. This quality can be put to good use as you get them into an active/collaborative learning mode and raise their participation and achievement levels in a structured (with clear goals and reduced uncertainty), and graded (from simple to complex tasks) manner.
During matriculation, all freshmen are given ‘The Effective Student: A guide to learning for the NUS student’, a publication which provides advice and tips to help students engage productively in their own learning. Students can also acquire tips on improving their learning skills from the student workshops organised by CDTL. Throughout the course of their undergraduate education, students need to develop and strengthen the requisite skills for communication (e.g. reading, writing, presentation) and lifelong learning (e.g. thinking skills, research skills, social interaction skills, skills which help them to effectively manage their time and cope with stress etc.). Your teaching sessions can and should provide ample opportunities to train students in honing these essential skills.

As a TA, you will have contact with a broad spectrum of the undergraduate student population. Students, especially freshmen, tend not to differentiate very much between TAs and regular faculty members. Besides relying on you for academic input and advice, they are also likely to raise a number of concerns external to the classroom and seek your advice on these matters. As TAs, you are connected to students by virtue of your age and experiences and therefore, are in a good position to support their academic development and personal growth in NUS.