

NJ GRADNET

# UNIVERSITY RESOURCE DOCUMENT

**A guide to choosing where to  
venture**

**PART I  
HOW TO APPROACH UNIVERSITY SELECTION**

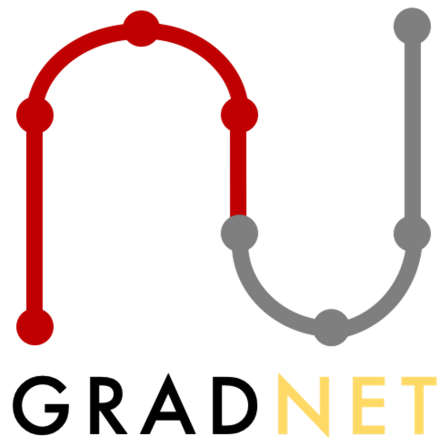
# About Us

## Empowering Students, one Alumnus at a time.

Started in 2018, NJGradNet was motivated by a desire to ensure that every aspiring student would be afforded the support he/she needs to achieve his/her post-tertiary goals. Working in tandem with existing school process and auxiliary groups, the team aims to establish a system that creates greater synergy between NJC and its alumni, and leverage its alumni as a valuable resource for the benefit of its students.

## Mission

The National Junior College Graduates Network hopes to lend a hand in helping our promising young students succeed in their post-JC endeavors. Through this network, we hope to make contacting alumni with the relevant experiences and expertise that much more accessible for current students.



# Introduction

Selecting universities to apply to can be daunting - we've all been through it. Unlike the choice of secondary school or junior college, choosing a university is a decision that will undoubtedly have significant impact on multiple aspects of your tertiary education and career. In many cases, it can influence your available opportunities, affect your desired experiences, and shape your outlook on future possibilities. In particular, it can dictate the academic, co-curricular, and social resources afforded to you for the subsequent 3-4 years of your college education.

## We're Here To Help

While certainly not determinant, it is important that you approach your selection of universities in an informed and deliberate manner. That said, this need not be an intimidating process. There are common considerations that can guide you in approaching, and ultimately making the decision on your choice of university. These considerations can act as benchmarks for you to not just weigh the pros and cons between universities, but also help shed some light on what it is you wish to obtain from a university education. Regardless of how they are applied, they serve as useful starting points for thinking about universities.

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# ONE

## COURSE OF STUDY

For most, what you choose to read in university will have significant bearing on where you choose to go. Different colleges have different courses of study that they offer, specialize in, and are known for. This is affected by the number of specialized faculty the institution has, the scope of the course, the classes offered, the latitude with which you can explore your own interests within the course, and the prevalent school of thought through which the course is taught, among other factors.

All this contributes to the quality of the course, the level of academic rigour, and the extent to which you will find the course intellectually challenging or satisfying.

Taking the US for example, for students interested in pursuing Computer Science or Data Science, Stanford University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Carnegie Mellon University immediately stand out as examples of reputable institutions that offer a trusted, high-quality, flexible, and well-structured curriculum. For students interested in pursuing Business, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School is definitely a household name.





**Location may also be a consequential factor as well, depending on the course of study.** For example, if you are interested in pursuing environmental policy, a country such as the Netherlands would be a good choice. If you are interested in international relations in East Asia, you would find substantial value in choosing to study in China, Japan, or Korea. If you are interested in security policy, being in the US would arguably position you at the forefront of global policy making in that domain. This relates not to the research or internship opportunities available, but rather the overall academic environment in which you will be studying. It helps to be where policy is made and where discussions are being held. **Simply put, it's worth being there as things happen.**



The location of a university refers not only to the country within which the university is situated in, but the city (and state, if applicable) as well. It is crucial to note here that countries are not monolithic. Different cities and states within countries can have their own social, economic, political, and bureaucratic contexts, which can often vary drastically in comparison with each other. As such, while looking at location, studying the country as a whole may not be sufficient.

Location can affect a multitude of things on a day-to-day level like:

- Quality of healthcare
- Costs of living
- Efficiency of government services
- Social and cultural environment
- Language requirements
- Employment prospects
- Travel possibilities
- Distance from home

A useful evaluation of these factors will thus be contingent upon an understanding of the country's or city's context. For example, studying in the United States may mean that you can expect generally slower government services, varied levels of public transportation efficiency, and higher costs of living (i.e. food) and healthcare. However, you can also expect few problems with speaking the language, vast travel opportunities, and in-country employment prospects after graduation (e.g. Optional Practical Training applications). Specifically, studying in Boston, MA would be relatively safe, and have fewer instances of social and racial discrimination (given its sizably diverse student population) compared to other parts of the US.

On another level, the current affairs of, and incidents happening in a country might be reasons that would compel you to apply or avoid applying for university in a particular location. Take Brexit - a student interested in studying Europe's political and security architectures (e.g. the European Union), the global trends of populism, or the impact of growing socio-economic disparity on domestic governance might jump at the chance to study in the UK at this time. This also applies to those interested in studying the phenomenon of Brexit itself. However, the geopolitical uncertainties, economic and bureaucratic difficulties, and domestic instability associated with Brexit might discourage others from considering the UK as a destination for college. As such, do consider the civic landscape of the country when thinking about location.

Lastly, location may also affect the kinds of perspectives you are exposed to. For example, studying East Asian Studies in China would likely be different from that in the U.S, due to the different approaches and outlooks that come with differing ideologies, assumptions, and mental frameworks associated with the state. Hence, it would be good to think about what kind of perspectives you would like to see and learn from.



# THREE

## RANKINGS

It is worth starting this section with the observation that in Singapore's competitive education landscape, rankings are often revered as a major indicator of a university's value and educational worth. While rankings are a useful data point for evaluating a university, they are **but one of many data points, and cannot be the sole arbiter of how good or desirable a university is.** Notably, a particular university may be better in a specific area of study than another university but have a lower ranking overall. It is thus important to understand exactly how universities are ranked, and what these rankings mean (or do not mean) for a prospective undergraduate.

The two most frequently reviewed rankings are the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. Students, teachers, and parents alike often monitor and rely on them to assess the quality of a university. However, taking the rankings at face value is insufficient - rankings differ on their metrics, weightages, and facticity. The QS rankings use six metrics while The Times Higher Education rankings use metrics within five areas.



Academic Reputation	Teaching (the learning environment)
Employer Reputation	Research (volume, income and reputation)
Faculty/Student Ratio	Industry Income (knowledge transfer)
Citations per faculty	Citations (Research influence)
International Faculty Ratio	International outlook (Staff, students and research)
International Student Ratio	

Notice that some of these categories, such as faculty/student ratios and proportion of international staff and students, can actually be indicative of the quality of education and college life at that academic institutions. However, other categories like academic reputation and knowledge transfer can be fairly subjective. Other categories that measure research influence and contributions have arguably minimal direct impact on an institution's curriculum offerings, albeit with some indirect impact on research opportunities on-campus.

That said, rankings can still be important to you for a variety of reasons. Some employers (though not all) still pay attention to a university's brand name. For scholarship recipients, some ministries refer to rankings to inform their decision to approve your choice of university. On a more personal note, rankings can also matter to you and your family and relatives reputationally. These are all **valid reasons stemming from an assessment of your own situation**, but it is nevertheless important that you avoid taking rankings as a single point of truth.

A large part of the university experience is living independently in a new social setting.

For many, this will be the first time you will be living alone and away from home for an extended period of time - regardless of overseas or in a local residential hall. You will have to find community, build safe spaces and interest groups, and if you are overseas, you might have to do all of this from scratch.

As with any new experience, there are pros and cons to weigh, and your university decision could affect the social environment in which you find yourself in.



## FOUR

### STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS & STUDENT COMMUNITIES

Staying in Singapore would mean that you would be remaining in a social environment surrounded by people you know. In colleges like NUS or NTU, the student population is still largely JC-educated and Singaporean. Because the cohort sizes in Singapore are quite small, and that universities and JCs are few, chances are that your JC friends and friends from other JCs will end up in the institution as you. Even if they are not, you will still be able to maintain your pre-existing social circles simply by virtue of staying in Singapore - not unlike how many still meet up with their secondary or primary school friends. What this all translates to is your holding on to existing friends in a familiar environment, while still being able to meet new people in college. This can be a huge plus point for those deciding between a local and overseas education.

Studying overseas can be difficult. You are thrust into a new environment, having to deal with cultural differences and sensitivities. You find yourself part of the minority, either in terms of nationality or ethnicity. You might also have to build your own community from scratch, international and Singaporean. This can all be challenging, especially having to endure it without family and friends you have known for years. That feeling might even be exacerbated when you start to realise how unique and amazing Singaporean food is. We've all been there.

Yet this also inevitably leads to more diverse experiences as you start interacting and living with people from various cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Think Singapore is multi-racial and multi-religious? Studying in an overseas university will open up your eyes (even if it's just by a little) - the Singapore pre-tertiary system can be a bubble, and the world is so much more varied than we think.

When studying overseas, aspects of community to look out for would be the size of the cohort (which can vary drastically between colleges), proportion of local versus international students, as well as the number of Singaporeans studying there. This would inform you not just of the social and other challenges you would face, but also the opportunities for exploration. Large, more traditionally reputable colleges such as the University of London schools (i.e. LSE, UCL, Kings, etc) are bound to have more Singaporean and international students. The UK in general has many Singaporeans. On the other hand, depending on where you go in the US, the student population can either be very international or very white American. Finding community is important, and while it can come in all shapes and forms, understanding the demographics of your desired school will help immensely.

# FIVE

## TUITION FEES



Tuition fees for universities can be fairly expensive. Depending on your individual circumstance, this can strongly determine your choice of institution (and even course).

We will approach this section by first talking about university fees in general, before going into the ways in which you may finance them.

**For Singapore universities like NUS, NTU, SIT and Laselle,** tuition fees generally fall below SGD\$10,000 per year. In SMU, SUSS and SUTD, this might range from about SGD\$11,000 to \$13,000 per year. Other private universities such as SIM and JCU will cost a lot more than this.

**Overseas universities,** on the other hand, tend to be a lot more expensive. In the US, tuition fees can cost anywhere between SGD\$60,000-90,000, while in Australia and the UK, tuition fees are around the range of SGD\$25,000-40,000.

Your chosen course of study will affect these calculations as well, and this applies to both the type of course and course duration. For example, Singapore medical students in NUS or NTU can expect to pay significantly more, about SGD\$27,000-34,000. This would be the case with other high-demand and specialized courses like law, dentistry, or any other course with direct honors as well. In addition, 3-year courses would also be cheaper than 4-year courses simply due to the shorter duration of study. Do note that these are all ballpark figures, and it is important that you research thoroughly before making a decision. You can usually find estimates of a university's tuition fees on its website or course catalogues.

One more point is that these figures reflect the baseline school fees, and do not include additional expenses such as residency/dormitory fees, compulsory health insurance or meal plan fees, security deposits, etc. These vary vastly, so instead of elaborating on them, it would be more appropriate to just highlight the existence of these "hidden costs" here.

On financing these fees, there are usually multiple payment options or ways of alleviating the financial burden. In Singapore, Singapore Citizens usually have the option of using their (or their parents') CPF to service their tuition fees if they are studying in a local, public university. Local and overseas universities often have a range of financial aid opportunities too (sometimes called tuition grants), although this may come with part-time work obligations on campus (think 3 hours a week as a librarian or research assistant). Some universities also offer loans, but please make sure to compare interest rates between universities and banks to ensure you're making a good decision.



**Scholarships and bursaries are another way of financing your tertiary education.** You will find them being offered by government agencies, private companies and corporations, and even universities. These awards will have differing financial terms and conditions, contingent on factors like the awarding agency and the “tier” of scholarship awarded. However, they are generally appealing because they often cover the full expense of your education, and may include some form of living allowance as well. We will cover scholarships and bursaries in a separate document, but suffice to say that while these opportunities provide a stress-free financially speaking) way of paying for your university fees, they are not all the same, with some being more consequential for your education and career than others.

For example, almost all scholarships will come with academic requirements to meet during your undergraduate education (e.g. minimum GPA, honors, etc). While some scholarships and bursaries (like those awarded by universities) may be bond-free, others usually have a bond period of 4-6 years in which you are contractually obligated to work for the awarding agency. **Regardless, if you are thinking about applying for these, make sure you do not miss any deadlines!**

# SIX

## FACULTY

A big part of what makes a university renowned for a particular course offering is not just the course curriculum or available opportunities, but the professors and lecturers as well. They can significantly influence your academic and research experiences on campus, and **a good faculty can ensure that you remain engaged and interested**, while also having **access to some of the luminaries** in your field of study. This might seem tangentially related to the point stated above dealing with “course of study”, but focussing on teaching faculty also means understanding exactly who is in the department or program responsible for your curriculum.

For example, if you do not have faculty that are involved in your specific concentration, or that only have an exclusively theoretical or exclusively policy background, you might not achieve your academic objectives.

On another note, being taught by the brightest minds in your field of study can be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Having someone like John Mearsheimer teach you a class on great power politics, or Paul Krugman teach you a class on international trade, or John Conway teach you a class on number theory, is always a thrill (even you might not agree with them).

Paying attention to faculty also means looking at the more administrative aspects. This includes teaching formats (i.e. seminar-style, lecture-style, etc), teacher-student ratios, academic requirements for graduation, and so on.



# SEVEN

## EXCHANGES, INTERNSHIPS AND RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

University is not just about deepening your professional knowledge. It is also a period of growth, development, and self-discovery. It is important that you leverage your university experience to **broaden your horizons and obtain a global view of the world.** By virtue of location, those who initially choose to study overseas will naturally find these opportunities more easily. However, those who study locally are not at a disadvantage.

## **EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES AND JOINT DEGREES**

Currently, local universities partner with universities globally to provide opportunities for students to participate in an exchange.

For instance, NUS has a Student Exchange Programme that allows students to choose from over 300 partner universities in more than 40 countries; NTU provides opportunities for students to study a semester in places like Finland and Austria.

There are also programmes that offer joint degrees and allow you to obtain the second degree through overseas study for a few years. Such exchanges provide exposure for personal growth and development too, without having to be away from friends and family for years on end. That said, those studying overseas may also benefit from exchanges to other countries, for many of the reasons listed in the rest of this document.

## **RESEARCH PROGRAMMES AND ATTACHMENTS**

While many universities have final year research projects and thesis writing, you may be interested in additional research programmes, industry attachments and internships. In terms of research programmes, some colleges have departments that are known to be at the forefront of research in particular fields of study. For instance, King's College London has a *Drosophila* behavioural lab that Imperial College London lacks. If you are particularly interested in researching a specific subject area, it would be useful to find out if the university is able to accommodate such projects to support your learning.

More often than not, universities have links and partnerships with industrial partners or companies. Some universities such as Imperial College London offer a year abroad or a year in industry in addition to an undergraduate degree. In addition, Johns Hopkins University offers attachments with think-tanks in the Washington DC area. Undergraduate students may also participate in Masters or PhD level projects. Such programmes are beneficial if you wish to gain industry experience. Hence, it may be worth having a look at the different affiliations and partnerships a university might have.

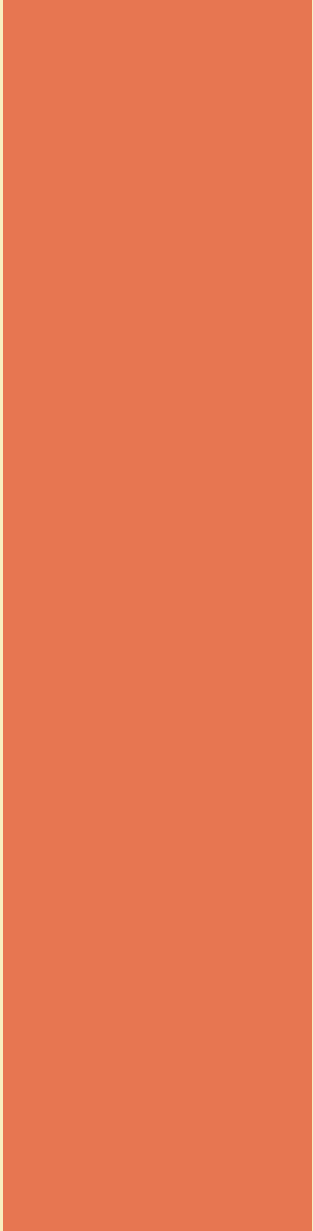
# EIGHT

## CLUBS & SOCIETIES

Clubs and societies provide a platform for you to discover **new interests and develop new skills**. Some colleges are known for having a larger range of clubs and societies available for you to choose from and may even include niche areas such as wine and cheese tasting. If you are a competitive sportsman/professional artist, it may be worth considering the school's involvement in the area. That being said, it is important to remember that as an adult in university, you are given the opportunity to start up your own societies and clubs.



Clubs and societies are also a way for you to meet **more people and expand your social circle**. Having a strong support group in school can help you through your years of tertiary study. If you are interested in studying overseas, such mediums are also helpful in allowing you to interact with students from other cultures and allow the exchange of ideas. You'll be amazed by how much we can learn from each other.



This is a crucial, yet often overlooked, factor of consideration. It is important to put your tertiary education into perspective, bearing in mind that you will be spending 3-4 years in that university. Every university has its own traditions, stereotypes, histories, demography, character, identity, etc. All this informs the cultural makeup and reputation of the school, which in turn determines how quickly and comfortably you can fit in, if at all.

For a concept as amorphous and vague as a university culture, it can be a challenge to articulate it in writing. However, there are some examples - for one, MIT students tend to be extremely hardworking, but are also known for the huge and happening parties thrown by their fraternities as pressure valves. Tufts students are famous for being quirky, with many aspiring pre-professionals who are eager to seek cross-registration opportunities at Harvard or MIT.

## NINE

### UNIVERSITY CULTURE



It is also worth noting that culture **is always under construction and is never static**. The best way to understand the culture of a university, then, is to speak to students past and present, and get a sense of how they view their experiences in college. Alternatively, explore forum pages and social media to see what people have to say - the internet often enables the harshest and bluntest of critics and observers alike.





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**NATIONAL JC GRADUATES NETWORK**

For NJCians, By NJCians