REIMAGINING THE WAY FORWARD


The Alumni Magazine of The National University of Singapore

nus.edu.sg/alumnet/TheAlumNUS
COVID-19 has amplified many pressing needs in our communities. In these unprecedented times, we need to rise above our fears and take action to make the world a better place.

FROM COMPASSION TO ACTION

Find Opportunities, Celebrate Stories

To learn more: nus.edu.sg/alumnet/DOS

Dear alumni and friends,

Please join me in congratulating the Class of 2021 and welcoming them to the NUS Alumni family! To the Class of 2021 – your resilience and agility in navigating through these challenging and unprecedented times are evidence of your ability to adapt and thrive as you embark on the next phase of your lives. Our hats off to you!

Plans for a new normal were laid out at the beginning of 2021, as the number of COVID-19 cases eased and Singapore’s national vaccination programme was progressively rolled out by the government. However, the unfortunate spike in cases in May has set us back somewhat. It is a stark reminder that we must remain vigilant and prepared for any re-emergence – and respond swiftly in a calm and united manner in that event. The University has had to make the difficult and judicious decision to move Commencement online. We are aware that many of you were disappointed but the health and safety of everyone remain our utmost priority, even as we continue to observe this hallmark tradition of celebrating and recognising your academic achievements and accomplishments.

Our cover story looks at the evolving student and alumni experience in the wake of the pandemic. While the situation still looks grey, it has proven to be an opportune time for our various faculties, schools and departments to reframe, redesign and revitalise the value proposition of a university education to meet the demands of a fast-changing and digitalising society. I am confident that these cross-collaborations, innovations and platforms – such as the enhanced Career+ phone app, the upcoming conNectUS and others – will equip the NUS family to navigate these disruptions well.

Elsewhere in our pages, we invited graduands from different backgrounds to share their youthful aspirations, as well as deep concerns of plunging into a COVID-fraught world, as part of this issue’s Forum discussion. I am encouraged by the tenacity and grit of our newly-minted alumni, as they regaled us with their coping strategies, hopes and dreams for the future in this new normal.

Fellow alumni, it has been more than a year since the pandemic cramped our style; my team and I at the alumni office have fully pivoted and are eager (and ready) to engage you digitally. It is heartening that the virtual arena allows us to connect with many more alumni across different time and geographical zones. While we are still not out of the woods, we look forward to your active participation in our upcoming signature events – the Bukit Timah Homecoming and Kent Ridge Alumni Family Day. Until it is safe to meet and connect with you in-person, my team and I will continue to provide an array of programmes, in cyberspace, to cater to your interests and needs. Please continue to keep well, stay safe, stay healthy and – whenever possible – stay home.

Warmest wishes,

Mr Bernard Tan
(Architecture ‘84)
Director, Alumni Relations

SUBMIT YOUR STORIES TO US!

Read The AlumNUS online at nus.edu.sg/alumnet/TheAlumNUS!
If you have submissions for the following, let us know at alumnihelpdesk@nus.edu.sg:
- Lifelong Learners Highlight
- Book Corner
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**KICKSTART YOUR CAREER INTO HIGH GEAR**

Put your growth into overdrive with the NUS Resilience & Growth Initiative

In times of disruption, the ability to change gears has never been more important. Accelerate your development with a range of Professional, Executive and Graduate Certificates designed to equip you with the skills you need to get on the career ladder.
THREE WAYS TO NURTURE FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN A TECH-DOMINANT FUTURE

The HERoes in Leadership event saw women at the forefront of the innovation sector sharing their insights on the way forward.

FACILITATING DIGITAL INCLUSION

The first strategy is to facilitate digital inclusion, democratising access to tech training and education to narrow the digital divide and make sure nobody gets left behind in the digital space.

“We need to ensure that a digital world is not going to be less diverse and inclusive,” Ms Carolyn Chin-Parry, Digital Innovation Leader at PwC Singapore and IT Woman of the Year for Asia, stressed. “I believe that through the right type of technology, as well as people’s willingness to help out, this can be done.”

An avid proponent of digital upskilling, Ms Chin-Parry capitalises on her technological experience as a leader to offer courses pro-bono to charities and non-profit organisations, as well as mentor people from less-developed countries to counter poverty levels. Within PwC, she has also spearheaded the digital upskilling initiative for its 84,000 employees around the Asia-Pacific region, including data literacy skills, visualisation, analytics and automation skills.

Ms Melanie Richards, Former Deputy Chair and Board Member of KPMG, and founding member of the 30% Club steering committee—a UK-based initiative promoting gender diversity and leadership—concurred. She underscored the importance of mindful intervention, “to make our organisations stronger, to make them more creative, more collaborative, and most importantly, more inclusive.”

ENCOURAGING WOMEN TO ENTER STEM COURSES AND PROFESSIONS

The second strategy is to embolden women and girls to venture into STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—courses and professions. Referring to a Straits Times article, Ms Chin-Parry observed how there is some leakage in the talent pipeline, where girls in STEM disciplines do not necessarily go on to STEM professions upon graduation.

The importance of encouraging females into STEM disciplines and careers was taken up by Ms Jane Sun, Chief Executive Officer and Director of Trip.com. “We need to really make the extra effort to encourage female students from the beginning to learn as many STEM classes as possible,” she shared, highlighting the immense opportunity for students who specialise in tech-driven disciplines. “You don’t have to be a coding engineer, but knowing some technology will really widen career options and open doors for you in the future.”

Ms Sun’s words echoed NUS President Professor Tan Eng Chye’s commitment to gender diversity in academia.

Some examples include progressive policies such as giving female faculty members a reduced teaching workload for a semester after returning from maternity leave, as well as initiating the Rising Stars Women in Engineering Workshop in 2018.

Ms Sun’s words echoed NUS President Professor Tan Eng Chye’s commitment to gender diversity in academia.

Finally, it is essential that girls have successful female leaders in STEM professions to look up to and emulate. “If we don’t have enough women visible regularly in every industry, whether it’s sports or business, science, tech engineering, or leadership for that matter, then girls don’t feel they have someone like themselves to role model,” said Ms Andrea Della Mattea, President of Microsoft Asia Pacific.

“As leaders in organisations, we have the opportunity and frankly the responsibility, to really make that happen.”

This was echoed by Ms Chin-Parry, who noted the importance of girls identifying with, and being inspired by, top female leaders in STEM sectors. “It’s great for them to hear different stories and perspectives of how other women have thrived in what appear to be very male-dominated industries,” she said.

Her concluding words sum up the spirit of the webinar: “Find your passion, find your purpose and create the legacy that you can be very proud of.”
MEETING THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY: HOW UNIVERSITIES SHOULD TRANSFORM AND INNOVATE

Adapting to change is key in order for tertiary institutions to stay relevant and maintain their edge.

This article was first published on 27 April 2021 on NUS News at www.nus.edu.sg/meeting-the-needs-of-society-how-universities-should-transform-and-innovate.

Above: From left: Prof Yang, Prof Qiu and Mr Chatterjee.

Left: Greetings between His Excellency Periassamy Kumaran, High Commissioner of India, Singapore, and Mr Tan Kian Woo (Business '88), NUS Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer.

Below: A guest collecting her goodie bag, courtesy of the High Commission of India.

OAR HIGHLIGHTS

OAR HIGHLIGHTS

INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL 2021

Due to current pandemic restrictions, this year's showcase took the form of a hybrid event.

Joingly organised by the High Commission of India, Singapore and NUS Alumni Relations, the Indian Film Festival returned for the sixth time to bring the best of Indian films to NUS alumni. In the year of Celebrating 65 Women, this year’s festival featured the stories of three women who embrace life’s challenges in different ways. Held from 17 to 19 March at the Shaw Foundation Alumni House (in accordance with safe management measures), the festival featured critically-acclaimed films Badrinath Ki Dulhania, Kahaani and Queen.

Distinguished guests to the Opening Night on 16 March were treated to a screening of Hindi Medium. This light-hearted comedy sheds light on the education system in India, as a couple goes through extraordinary measures to enrol their child into a prestigious school. Guests also brought home an abundant goodie bag courtesy of the High Commissioner of India in Singapore, which included Indian traditional snacks, tea leaves and a practical sanitising kit with antibacterial wipes, facemasks and a few bottles of hand sanitiser.

In attendance for the evening were His Excellency Periassamy Kumaran, High Commissioner and Mr Shri Siddhartha Nath, Deputy High Commissioner from the High Commission of India in Singapore; Mr Tan Kian Woo (Business '88), NUS Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer; and Mr Edward D'Silva (Architecture '75), NUS Alumni Advisory Board Member.

Films were also screened virtually and alumni who signed up enjoyed watching the films in the comfort of their homes. Stay tuned for upcoming film festivals and film screenings happening later this year!

This article was first published on 27 April 2021 on NUS News at www.nus.edu.sg/meeting-the-needs-of-society-how-universities-should-transform-and-innovate.
ON 13 APRIL, IN A SESSION ORGANISED IN PARTNERSHIP with the NUS School of Continuing and Lifelong Education (SCALE), Future-Ready Workshops welcomed young alumni Mr Victor Zhu (Science ’20), Founder and CEO of Hatch, and Ms Charmain Tan (Science ’12), Founder and CEO of QuickDesk. In this engaging session, Mr Zhu shared how one could jumpstart a successful and fulfilling career in the digital era, while Ms Tan highlighted how digital transformation could be achieved from both top-down and bottom-up. More than 160 alumni tuned in and gained insights on how individuals and leaders can ensure that they keep up with today’s rapidly digitalising world.

LUNCH DIALOGUES
MASTERING E-COMMERCE AND CONQUERING RETAIL

ON 19 MARCH, A GROUP OF 90 ALUMNI JOINED Ms Priscilla Shunmugam (Law ’06), founder and designer of fashion label, Atelier Ong Shunmugam, in a casual and interactive Lunch Dialogues session. Organised in partnership with the NUS Society and moderated by Dr Sean Kuan Thye (Arts and Social Sciences ’94), Ms Shunmugam shared anecdotes of her journey, her climb to success and how she pivoted during the pandemic to digitalise her business and found new ways to both connect with regular customers and win the hearts of new fashionistas.

FUTURE-READY WORKSHOPS
ADVANCING YOUR CAREER IN THE DIGITAL ERA

MULTILINGUALISM - OPENING NEW DOORS

In today’s world of globalisation and internationalisation, learning a new language is a very valuable economic and social resource to future-proof ourselves.

Join Associate Professor Titima Suthiwan, Director, NUS Centre for Language Studies as she shares how we can begin the journey to multilingualism and the opportunities available at NUS.

Breeding Unicorns

Ms Guan Dian
(Computing ’10)
Co-Founder and Senior VP (Asia-Pacific), PatSnap

Mr Jeffrey Tiong
(Engineering ’08)
Founder and CEO, PatSnap

17 September 2021 (Friday), 12.00pm to 1.00pm, via Zoom

JOIN US ONLINE!
Register at:
alumnet.events/LDsep21

PROGRAMME

12.00pm - 12.30pm
- Introduction of Speaker
- Sharing by Mr Jeffrey Tiong (Engineering ’08) & Ms Guan Dian (Computing ’10), Co-Founders, PatSnap

12.30pm - 1.00pm
- Q&A Session moderated by Mr Tong Hsien-Hui (Engineering ’98)
- End of Programme

Founded in 2007, PatSnap - short for patents in a snap - provides data and analytics on intellectual property to more than 10,000 customers including Spotify Technology and Xiaomi Corp.

Today, PatSnap is NUS’s pride and joy, having attained Unicorn status after securing US$300 million in Series E funding - a first for NUS-supported start-ups.

Join Mr Jeffrey Tiong and Ms Guan Dian in this illuminating talk on how they got started, becoming a global patents database platform, expanding to China and joining the list of global technology unicorns - gained from a surge in research and development spending.

JOIN US ONLINE!
Register at:
alumnet.events/FRjul21

DATE : 13 JULY 2021, TUESDAY
TIME : 7.30PM - 9.00PM
PLATFORM : ZOOM

Join us online at:
alumnet.events/FRjul21
All You Need to Know About Strokes

The 22 April session of Health and Wellness, organised with Farrer Park Hospital, featured Dr Chou Ning, who gave an illuminating talk to over 200 alumni via Zoom on the different types of strokes, risk factors for strokes, and ways to prevent them. Stroke is the fourth-leading cause of death and one of the top contributors to adult disability in Singapore. Attendees were able to tap on Dr Chou’s expertise to gain a better grasp of the dangers and burdens of strokes, as well as clarify their pressing medical concerns.

TECH TALK

IoT & 5G Security for the Future

On 18 May, the second session of Tech Talk [Online] for 2021, held in collaboration with the Institute of Systems Science (NUS-ISS), featured Dr Nicholas Ho (Engineering ’13), Lecturer and Consultant for Artificial Intelligence Practice, and Mr Ng Kok Leong (Computing ’99), Senior Lecturer and Consultant for Digital Strategy and Leadership Practice. Dr Ho and Mr Ng talked attendees through the various use cases of 5G in IoT technology and autonomous systems, and security considerations to enhance IoT security, which are salient emerging technologies to note in today’s fast-moving world of digitalisation.

Managing Wellbeing – The NUS Experience and You

The pandemic has led to increased anxiety about the future of work and livelihood, with more people seeking help for mental health issues. Join Dr Andrew Tay (Medicine ’07) and Dr Kinjal Doshi from the NUS Health and Wellbeing Team in the Office of the President, who will share their insights from the #AreuOK campaign, roles of employers and managers in employees’ health and wellbeing, and how these relate to you.

WoW: Ignite – TIES

1 September 2021 | Wednesday
7.30pm - 9.00pm
Join us Online
alumnet.events/WoWsep21
A blessing in disguise

Ms Teresa Pang (Design and Environment ‘96), a practitioner in the field of Architecture and Urban Planning, recounts how COVID-19 gave her the opportunity to learn again.

“I am a self-directed and self-motivated learner. Over the last two decades, I have studied and explored widely, cutting across disciplines. To me, it is as important to be a specialist as it is to be a generalist. I believe that the ultimate purpose of knowledge is not merely to become rich, but to use it to contribute to society, serve humanity, and make the world a better place.

This has shaped my learning attitude and appetite which is fuelled by passion, love and joy. When COVID-19 brought me back to my alma mater through the SGUS Programme in SD BIM for Built Environment Professionals, I welcomed the new learning opportunity with excitement. I looked forward to having my ideas, ideologies and world views challenged and pushed to new heights by my professors and instructors. The professors in the university are like shepherds; they provide guidance and direction to continuously lead their students forward. In the last six months, under their guidance, I have lived, expanded and grown my love for learning. The exchanges I had with them were priceless. They have also become my role models to look up to and emulate as I go back to the industry. Education has re-entered my heart because of their guidance and support, and helped me grow wings, to enable my new dreams of flying. COVID-19 has turned out to be an unexpected season of new growth and a pause to recalibrate — from within and without — for my next career and direction in life. I left the course with many relationships that I will treasure for a very long time. To me, COVID-19 has proven a blessing in disguise.”

UNPRECEDENTED:
TO THE BEAT OF HER OWN DRUM

Edited by Ms Nadia Yeo (Law '09, Public Policy '18) and Ms Erliana Zaid
Young Women in Leadership Dialogue, Mendaki Club

Resilience, Courage, Compassion, Commitment. These are values that women have embodied in the pursuit of excellence and progress. Challenging norms and breaking barriers, the 20 young women from the Malay/Muslim community featured in this book have expressed leadership over not only their own lives, but also those of others. Read about their inspiring journeys in this commemorative volume conceptualised and written by a team of 50 youth volunteers from Mendaki Club.

“This book profiles 20 stories of courage and resilience. It captures the compelling voices and realities of young women from the Malay/Muslim community determined to overcome hardships to achieve their dreams and aspirations on their own terms.”


Available at the NHB Malay Heritage Centre or online at: tinyurl.com/YWILDunprecedented.
ADAPTING TO AN ALTERED REALITY

COVID-19 has made life within and beyond the classroom virtually (pun intended) unrecognisable. Stripped of the in-person interactions so vital to the student experience, some might say that universities have lost their value and become yet another casualty of the pandemic. But institutions of higher learning still have legs — if they dare to re-imagine themselves.

TEXT BY WANDA TAN

TRYING TO PREDICT THE FUTURE THESE DAYS — EVEN WERE MONTHS DOWN THE LINE — MIGHT BE A FOOL’S EMPIRE. This year’s NUS Commencement presents a case in point. Having postponed the event in 2020 due to the ongoing pandemic, NUS was gearing up for in-person Commencement ceremonies for both the Class of 2020 and the Class of 2021, from 17 June to end-July 2021, with safe management measures in place. However, the spike in cases in late April and the reimposition of restrictions on large gatherings forced the University to make an about-turn. On 20 May, NUS President, Professor Tan Eng Chye (Science ’85) announced “with a heavy heart” that the event would be held online instead. Many more examples abound of changes to the university experience in the wake of COVID-19 — both in terms of the academic curriculum and mode of delivery, as well as campus life. The pandemic has prompted higher education institutions all over the world to reassess and redouble their efforts to help students continue to learn and prepare for an as-yet-undefined future. On the social side, students and administrators are reinventing campus events and activities to suit the current situation, without sacrificing conviviality. Universities are also re-examining their alumni engagement strategies to ensure that, despite the crisis, alumni ties are not broken.

At NUS, faculty and staff were already making moves to adapt to the new economy well before the pandemic such as launching new degree programmes and focusing on lifelong learning initiatives. COVID-19 has ups the pace of change, and made undeniable the fact that universities cannot stay still if they wish to stay relevant.

REMOTE YET CONNECTED

In the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak in Singapore, one of the first things on people’s minds was how to facilitate a smooth transition to home-based learning. NUS’ previous forays into technology-enhanced learning — such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and ‘flipped classrooms’ — proved fortuitous as classes went fully online, and video conferencing software like Zoom was adopted en masse.

Faculty members got creative in thinking of ways to keep students engaged during online classes. In one example, Professor Sow Chong Haur (Science ’91), Head of NUS’ Department of Physics, came up with the idea of sending shoebox-sized kits containing lab apparatus to students’ homes so that they could conduct experiments together during Zoom tutorials. One such kit — made up of a compass, magnet, ruler, metal plates and other items — allowed students to measure magnetic fields with the aid of a mobile app. In another kit for a module on solid state physics, ping pong balls were used to create 3D arrangements of atoms. A small number of kits were even shipped to international students in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and China, who chose to stay in their home countries amid this global health crisis.

Although it was not possible to conduct certain experiments at home for safety or practical reasons — such as those requiring the handling of chemicals or bulky lab equipment — the kits heated up online classes by bringing in a hands-on component. “Instead of just logging in and listening to me explain or demonstrate concepts, students could conduct the demos themselves. It made lab sessions more interactive,” says Prof Sow. Having observed that students could better see demonstrations involving small items via Zoom compared to in a large lecture theatre, he is even considering blending online and face-to-face instruction when things eventually return to normal.

Other digital innovations that have made a big splash in the past year — and boosted experiential learning — include virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). Associate Professor in Practice Stella Tan (Science ’98), Academic Director of NUS’ Forensic Science Programme, had already introduced both technologies in one of her modules in 2019. With VR, her team set up simulated crime scenes based on true cases for students to conduct investigations. AR, on the other hand, enabled students to hold and manipulate 3D virtual evidence seized at the crime scene, and inspect blood spatter, fingerprints and small items of interest up close. “When the COVID-19 situation worsened, it was a logical move to incorporate these technologies into more modules to create an immersive experience for our students, even with remote learning,” says Assoc Prof Tan. Students could borrow the VR headsets, carry out investigations at home, and post the results online for group discussion. Not surprisingly, these technologies have gone down a treat with the students. VR and AR do away with the laborious physical process of setting up a mock crime scene and “bring an element of fun to serious topics”, she says. Given that courts such as those in Beijing have begun using VR to walk judges and juries through a crime scene or to see things from an eyewitness’ vantage point, familiarity with such tools may prove useful once students start their careers too.

NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine is also using VR to revamp its curriculum. With medical students on surgical rotation unable to go on clinical
include Create Real-life Experience And Teamwork In digital transformation projects under its belt. These transports users to a simulated hospital environment take part in a multidisciplinary ward round; and Virtual different health professions utilise online avatars to programme developed in 2017, where students from the long run.”

can fill in the training gaps by reducing variability and must be preserved,” he stresses. “However, technology practise in a safe environment before they enter the recorded accordingly. In addition, it allows students to which can be tracked objectively, and the milestones implementation of training content and methods, pandemic is a “major catalyst” in driving innovations in of the educators spearheading PASS-IT, believes the Assistant Dean (Education) of NUS Medicine and one

Fourth Industrial Revolution has blurred the boundaries within the physical, digital and biological worlds, with technological advances such as AI, robotics and the Internet of Things fundamentally altering the way we live, work and relate to one another. Nowadays, at least some digital know-how is needed to hold down a job – just about any job, in any industry – and ensure career mobility.

Yet, if anything, cherishing that which makes us human is more important than ever. As NUS President Prof Tan wrote in an opinion piece for The Straits Times on 8 January 2021: “[L]earning takes time and patience — not just in picking up the skills or content, but in the making of meaningful connections. These connections can be across domains and topics, across space and time, and across changing societal perceptions. But these connections are essential to make the learning personal for an individual. … The traits of curiosity, creativity and connecting the dots, as well as understanding oneself in society, will help people learn to be human, as well as earn a living.”

Within NUS Department of Communications and New Media (CNM), a curriculum review has been ongoing since 2017 to reflect rapid changes in media, including the rise of ubiquitous computing and AI, the datafication of society and culture, and the digitalisation of markets. The result is an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum that balances depth with breadth. It imparts job-specific skills and domain

AN OFFLINE/ONLINE APPROACH

While wholly online learning remained the default for some faculties and schools at the start of Academic Year 2020/2021, NUS Business School opted instead for a hybrid model that combined face-to-face teaching (with safe management measures, such as no more than 50 students in attendance) and online classes. NUS Business School Dean, Professor Andrew Rose, talks to The Alumnus about it.

Why the move to hybrid learning?

Prof Rose: Face-to-face instruction is more effective than online teaching, so some face-to-face time is better than none. Many key interactions ought to be face-to-face, particularly networking. That’s far easier if students attend classes in person.

What challenges did you face when it was first implemented?

Prof Rose: The list was long. There were teaching problems with the technology. The pace of teaching was disrupted and slower, as faculty members had to monitor students who were both watching ‘live’ and in the classroom. Many students didn’t have access to a quiet space with good bandwidth. Different time zones were also an issue.

Hybrid teaching wasn’t easy, but it served the community well under the circumstances.

How else have you sought to raise the School’s teaching standards?

Prof Rose: It was important for us in 2020 to send a credible signal to students that we take instruction seriously. Relaunching student feedback scores on courses and instructors was an obvious one. We’re also expanding our BizLab to facilitate student project work.

A RADICAL REIMAGINING

The widespread adoption of digital technologies is not just a tactic to enhance remote learning, but also emblematic of a longer-term trend underway in higher education: the shift to interdisciplinary learning. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has blurred the boundaries between the physical, digital and biological worlds, with technological advances such as AI, robotics and the Internet of Things fundamentally altering the way we live, work and relate to one another. Nowadays, at least some digital know-how is needed to hold down a job — just about any job, in any industry — and ensure career mobility.

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Within NUS Department of Communications and New Media (CNM), a curriculum review has been ongoing since 2017 to reflect rapid changes in media, including the rise of ubiquitous computing and AI, the datafication of society and culture, and the digitalisation of markets. The result is an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum that balances depth with breadth. It imparts job-specific skills and domain knowledge, as well as transferrable meta-skills such as creativity, teamwork and agility. Work-integrated learning is embedded through a 20-week Compulsory Internship Programme for third-year students. Moreover, at the state-of-the-art CNM Studio: Multimedia Production Makerspace, students from different disciplines can collaborate on game design, prototyping, video production and post-production, crisis communication simulation and other activities.

“The CNM major now integrates cultural studies, critical media studies, mass and computational communications, communication management and interactive media design,” says the Head of Department, Professor Audrey Yue. Popular modules include the revised Learning Innovation in the Digital Age and a new one called Sex in the Media. “Engaging the intersections of humanities, arts, social sciences and computing, we are the only department
FoE and SDE have a lot in common. Therefore, our training for engineers, designers and built environment professionals must evolve.

Professor Ho Teck Hua, NUS Senior Deputy President and Provost, voiced excitement about the news when it was announced in February: “FoE and SDE have a lot in common. In our everyday life, for instance, we are witnessing a convergence of engineering and design – sleek smart phones and consumer electronics, electric vehicles, as well as current nets-zero and emerging net-positive energy buildings … Therefore, our training for engineers, designers and built environment professionals must evolve.”

For FoE Dean Professor Aaron Thean, this curriculum upgrade will put students in a better position to address thorny issues relating to sustainability, liveability and — especially in a post-COVID world — healthcare. “Societal, environmental and technological challenges are clearly growing in complexity. There is a need for savvy engineers who have not only sound technical domain skills but also a good appreciation of design, communication and project management,” he tells The AlumNUS. “Our new curriculum will help students have a more holistic appreciation of the fields while allowing students to chart their own educational journeys. It gives students the flexibility to develop broad-based or specialised competencies, be more proficient in presenting informed solutions to multifaceted problems.”

Likewise, starting in Academic Year 2021/2022, incoming freshmen at the Faculty of Engineering (FoE) and the School of Design and Environment (SDE) — except Real Estate students — will undergo a new Common Curriculum that bridges the two domains.

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For FoE Dean Professor Aaron Thean, this curriculum upgrade will put students in a better position to address thorny issues relating to sustainability, liveability and — especially in a post-COVID world — healthcare. “Societal, environmental and technological challenges are clearly growing in complexity. There is a need for savvy engineers who have not only sound technical domain skills but also a good appreciation of design, communication and project management,” he tells The AlumNUS. “Our new programmes will help students in a competitive job market that is increasingly multidisciplinary, diverse and fast-changing.” Prof Thean does not rule out the possibility of one day establishing, like CHS, a College of Design and Engineering.

KEEPING CAMARADERIE ALIVE

Outside the academic sphere, COVID-19 has also dramatically changed the student experience. Perks associated with campus life, such as meeting new people and taking part in different clubs and activities, have been significantly curtailed. Large-scale events have had to be postponed, scrapped or moved online. This year, NUS held an e-Open House — the online equivalent of NUS Open Day, one of the University’s biggest events — for the second time in a row from 27 February to 6 March 2021, during which the various faculties and schools took turns promoting their courses to prospective students. Naturally, the new FoE–SDE Common Curriculum featured prominently at FoE’s e-Open House.

“Because of the current COVID-19 climate, we had to pivot and design our programming to showcase our students who have pursued unique paths overseas, with industry, in sports and outside the classroom,” says Mr Nizar Keshwani, Head/Associate Director (Strategic Outreach & Communications) at FASS. His co-lead Ms Janice Oon, Head/Associate Director (Corporate Communications) at FASS, says: “Given the COVID climate, we had to pivot and design our programming to showcase our students who have pursued unique paths overseas, with industry, in sports and outside the classroom.”

Those living on campus, who might be isolated in their dorm rooms and fighting loneliness, may be hit the hardest. At NUS’ Tembusu College, every effort was made to give students some semblance of residential college life amid the pandemic. Wherever possible, events such as the Tembusu Forum were held in hybrid format rather than completely online. This gave up to 50 students — especially first-year residents — a chance to attend the flagship event in person, while others tuned in via Zoom and posed questions to the guest speakers via Pigeonhole Live. For the most part, students could still enjoy daily activities such as meals with friends, late-night chats in the lounges and playing their favourite team sports, provided they adhered to the safe management measures.

There has been one upside to all this, according to Dr Kuan Yee Han, Senior Lecturer and Residential Fellow, Tembusu College, “new normal”, it encouraged students to think out of the box in planning events and activities.” For example, the bi-annual Tembusu Arts Week was conducted via Zoom or Twitch, with live-streaming of student performances. Students also produced virtual campus tour videos for the College’s e-Open House. Dr Kuan adds, “What is heartening is their creativity, positivity and determination. Going through this period together has given them an opportunity to bond through this unique experience.”

Such esprit de corps is also evident at Yale-NUS College, with its fully residential programme. “This has been a hard year, particularly for our international students who could not travel home to see their families. What has impressed me is how the Yale-NUS community came together to make sure everyone felt cared for. The pandemic has brought out the best in them,” says Dr Trisha Craig, Vice President (Engagement) of Yale-NUS. For instance, one student volunteered to organise early-morning, socially-distanced yoga sessions at the courtyard of Sage College, as a way of supporting the community’s physical and mental health. New student organisations were also formed, such as the environmentally-minded Yale-NUS Farming Collective. Alongside this peer support, Yale-NUS staff have come up with ingenious ways...
to make virtual events more fun. The latest Yale-NUS Global Affairs Lecture in March 2021, which was held online and featured guest speakers from the United States, included an in-person viewing party for a small number of faculty and students. Snacks were also delivered to other watch parties hosted by Global Affairs alumni. “By putting our events online, we have massively increased our audience and global reach,” Dr Craig adds.

**THE TIES THAT BIND**

Last but not least, alumni connections to their alma mater have been tested during this period. The NUS Office of Alumni Relations (OAR) responded by moving events online, such as its many workshops and talks, the popular Thirsty Thursdays and its annual Chinese New Year (CNY) Appreciation Dinner. As restrictions eased towards the end of 2020, OAR brought back its Film Festivals physical event series, albeit on a much smaller scale. In March, the Office of Alumni Relations (OAR) responded by moving events online, such as its many workshops and talks, the popular Thirsty Thursdays and its annual Chinese New Year (CNY) Appreciation Dinner. As restrictions eased towards the end of 2020, OAR brought back its Film Festivals physical event series, albeit on a much smaller scale. In March, the OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ‘84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ’84), says OAR Director Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture ‘84), citing “Zoom fatigue” as an ever-present concern.

For the virtual CNY Appreciation Dinner 2021, guests had festive meals delivered to their homes and were treated to pre-recorded performances. Another worry was that senior alumni might be left out of the digital world. OAR linked the NUS Senior Alumni group with the Computing Alumni Association, who conducted physical workshops (with safe management measures) to teach them how to use Zoom. NUS Senior Alumni members were thus able to continue their monthly Tea & Chat and Sing-Along sessions via the platform.

That said, there have been some positive takeaways as well. “As a bonus to using Zoom as a medium of engagement, we were able to better engage with alumni based overseas. We are especially thankful for dedicated alumni who, despite the time difference, volunteered their time and expertise to speak at our educational and enrichment workshops,” says Mr Toh. “The Chairpersons of our Overseas Chapters also gathered online every six months to exchange best practices, discuss common issues, network and lend one another support.”

In fact, there is much more to be said now for maintaining the alumni-university relationship. The global jobs crisis brought by COVID-19 has shone a brighter light on the importance of lifelong learning, as upskilling or reskilling oneself through continuing education and training (CET) is the only way to remain in the workforce. Learning does not, and should not, stop after graduation; it should be embraced all through life. “COVID-19 has accelerated the digitalisation of business processes and financial transactions, requiring individuals to be trained for new job scopes. At the same time, the downtime in many industries has allowed organisations to send their staff for retraining,” says Mr Suresh Punjabi, Associate Dean (Executive & Professional Development) of NUS’ School of Continuing and Lifelong Education (SCALE).

“Those who have been made redundant also need new skills and knowledge so that they will be eligible for roles at companies that are hiring.”

Interest in SCALE’s lifelong learning programmes has increased in the past year, notes Mr Punjabi. Some predate the pandemic, including the NUS CET500 catalogue of skills-based, industry-relevant courses for the public, and the alumni-only NUS Lifelong Learners programme. SCALE now also offers extra support to professionals and fresh graduates affected by COVID-19. Under the NUS Resilience & Growth (R&G) initiative, both the Class of 2020 and the Class of 2021 are given vouchers to offset the cost of CET courses. Meanwhile, NUS Singapore United Skills (SGUS) is a full-time training programme, launched in collaboration with SkillsFuture Singapore, to help jobseekers improve their employability.

It is anybody’s guess how long the pandemic will last. Staff, students and alumni all miss gathering in person and being in each other’s company. Nonetheless, the changes we have witnessed – the proliferation of tech-enabled learning, the cross-cutting of disciplines, the increased attention on lifelong learning, etc. – will certainly figure in the future of higher education, long after COVID-19 has ended. As long as NUS keeps up its change momentum and makes sure that students and alumni can handle whatever life throws at them, the University will continue to stand on firm ground. A
WHETHER THE UNIVERSITY?

And not just where is it, but when is it?

Dr Adrian W. J. Kuah and Ms Katrina Tan (Arts and Social Sciences ’98) reflect on how the higher learning experience of the future may transcend the campus setting — and why it should.

simply an alternative to be implemented in the near future. However, the lifting of the Circuit Breaker and the gradual move through the phases has seen the reversion to the mean, rather than the forcing ahead into the new normal. The question is, can and should we give up the ground we already conquered? Can we exploit the gains from the COVID-19 experience? Does the university need to be contained within a set of buildings at set locations where people go?

John Dewey, deemed the modern father of experiential education, spoke of the paucity of traditional education in Experience and Education (1938). Its imposition from above, external discipline, learning from texts and teachers, rote learning of skills, preparation for a remote future, and static aims and materials, all fail in preparing the young for future responsibilities, but instead inculcate “duality, receptivity and obedience.” Instead, he offered a progressive education based on his view that the social nature of mankind means that education is in itself a social process. As such, when education is treated as “intelligently directed development of the possibilities inherent in ordinary experience” — its potentialities are vast.

Where then, does this ordinary experience take place? Everywhere — within and without the traditional university campus. Dewey recognised that learning takes place in a variety of environments; and that while the school is a special one, nature and the social environment cannot be discounted. This harks back to his central premise that education is “a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating experience of the child,” through “a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession”.

Hence, education must transform its immobile members from “uninitiated and seemingly alien beings into robust trustees of its social environment.” As such, education cannot be divorced from the purposes and practices of the community. It cannot be pigeonholed into specific locations over specific periods of time.

By sheer dint of locating the learning outside the classroom, the complexity we expect to see in real life is built into the learning environment. Multidisciplinarity and complex problem-solving segue seamlessly from knowledge acquisition.

LEARNING FOR REAL LIFE

Technology has allowed the outside to be brought into the university — think of drone flights videotaping human and traffic flows in a city, or animations of volcanic eruptions. How about bridging the outside and the inside, beyond brief sojourns on learning journeys or that mandatory fieldwork excursus1?

Think instead of students setting up citizen science projects to track how light reflecting off an adjacent building at different times of the day affects the livability of a space? Or student-community projects to identify and track the movements and roosting locations of migratory birds? Or co-opting bands of cyclists to report the location of potholes in roads, so that data can be used to predict failure or as a reporting mechanism, or as sites where new materials can be tested? We have the technology that allows us to catch a Pokemon in the zoo. What if we could layer such augmented and virtual reality on a patch of green space and see how adding a lake, a path, or a playground can impact the space? Or using arthill destruction to anticipate behaviour during a fire in Marina Bay Financial Centre Tower 39? Or having students and researchers doing something with the 774 geocaches2 stashed across the island?

Such situated learning, expounded by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991, where knowledge is delivered in an authentic context, has been shown to be more effective, engenders communities of practice due to the high levels of social interaction and collaboration, and results in learners becoming engaged in more dynamic and complex activities. By sheer dint of locating the learning outside the classroom, the complexity we expect to see in real life is built into the learning environment. Multidisciplinarity and complex problem-solving segue seamlessly from knowledge acquisition.

But more than that, in bringing the students with our researchers out, we are also bringing the community into the university. Including the community in the learning and research demystifies research, puts a face to the scientist, allows parents a peek into what their children are doing, and encourages the young to be curious, dream and aspire. It builds a more common ownership of the university and its work. It creates a bond which goes beyond the time spent there personally, or the money spent on sending a loved one there. It creates meaning and a sense of pride. It creates that “I am putting a man on the moon” moment.

A country in mountains and seas, forests and urban areas, and a captive audience looking for different forms of engagement and ownership, never before has the time been so ripe for the university to leverage what it has on its doorsteps. As one of the last stops in preparing our young for society, the university can and should embed itself in the community. Not only in companies and through internships, but in the lived experience of learning and living, so that we can continually seek to understand, improve and share.

The university does not stop at its invisible boundary line. The city is our campus; the campus is our city.
is a very valuable economic and social resource to future-proof ourselves. Join Associate Professor Titima Suthiwann as she shares how we can begin the journey to multilingualism.

**Write About Love**

**Feature Films (Philippines)**

A young, female writer gets teamed up with a male writer to create the perfect romantic movie. Their clashing personalities and different perspectives on relationships lead them through a journey of self-discovery, as they ultimately find out what it really takes to write about love. (Film rating to be advised).

**Managing Wellbeing - The NUS Experience and You**

**Health & Wellness**

Speakers:

Dr Andrew Tay (Medicine ‘07), Director (Health & Wellbeing), Office of the President, NUS
Dr Kinjal Doshi, Lead Psychologist (Health & Wellbeing), Office of the President, NUS

In this instalment, Dr Andrew Tay and Dr Kinjal Doshi will share insights and the learning experience from NUS’ #AreuOK campaign, as well as examine the roles of employers and managers in employees’ health and well-being, and how these relate to you.

**The Future of Money - Decentralised Finance**

**Tech Talk**

Speaker: Mr Victor Liew (Computing ‘12), Co-Founder and CEO, Airwalral

Discover how the latest technologies impact or disrupt our lives, and stay abreast with the breakthroughs and developments of today.

**Kent Ridge Alumni Family Day**

NUS’ annual homecoming for alumni to stay connected to the entire NUS community. In view of the current restrictions on social gatherings, this event will be conducted online.

In the new normal, let us together redefine engagement, interaction and activity. Join us from the comfort of your home and participate actively as we REIMAGINE how to reconnect at this year’s Homecoming.

**China Film Festival 2021**

Jointly organised by the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, Singapore China Friendship Association and NUS Alumni Relations, China Film Festival returns to bring you the best of Chinese films.

**Breeding Unicorns**

**Lunch Dialogues**

Speakers:

Mr Jeffrey Tiong (Engineering ‘08), Founder and CEO, PatSnap
Ms Guan Dian (Computing ‘10), Co-Founder and Senior VP (Asia-Pacific), PatSnap

Join Mr Jeffrey Tiong and Ms Guan Dian in this illuminating talk on global patents database platform, PatSnap’s journey to becoming the first NUS-supported unicorn.

**Wow: Ignite**

Speakers:

Ms Janet Ang (Business ‘82), Nominated Member of Parliament
Ms Goh Ying (Design and Environment ‘05), Partner of Quest Ventures
Ms Triha Suresh (Public Policy ’11), Public Policy and Economic Graph Manager of LinkedIn
Ms Trisha Suresh (Public Policy ’11), Public Policy and Economic Graph Manager of LinkedIn

Moderator: Dr Intan Azura Mohktar (Science ‘98), Member of NUS Alumni Advisory Board and Founding Chairperson for WoW

Targeting young alumni and female students, Wow: Ignite – #7IES (Technological, Informational and Educational Sharing) hopes to ignite new ideas and inspire women in the NUS community to expand their horizons, enhance their ties and networks, unlock their potential and scale greater heights.

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In this new era, NUS’s #Future of Service continues to make a difference to those in need through community-initiated projects ranging from animal welfare and the environment to caring for children and the elderly.

**NUS Day of Service**

Now in its 6th year, NUS Day of Service has provided many people with the opportunity to give back to their communities and make a positive difference.

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INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN
What is it like to graduate in the midst of the crisis of a generation? A group of final-year NUS students and soon-to-be alumni share their stories about how they are responding to the challenges they have faced, and what are their hopes and aspirations for the future.

DISRUPTED, BUT NOT DERAILED
Six soon-to-be alumni share stories of interrupted dreams, adjusted aspirations, and the resilience to move forward in uncertain times.

OUR PANEL

Mr Asif Iqbal (Year 4, Arts and Social Sciences)
Ms Claire McColl (Year 4, Arts and Social Sciences)
Mr Jothinadan Pillay (Computing '21)
Ms Claryl Ho Jia Le (Year 4, Arts and Social Sciences)
Mr Shaun Tay Wei Jun (Business and Communications and New Media)

What were your goals and aspirations when you entered NUS as a freshman?

AASIF IQBAL AMINODIN: I initially focused on academic achievements, but naturally progressed to thinking about my career. A lot of my peers in Psychology are very passionate about our field of study and prefer to be practising psychologists. But our major requires us to attain a Masters degree or beyond in order to be one. Do I want another two years of Zoom classes? For Psychology students, conducting research, observing behaviour and gauging micro-expressions online is very challenging. So while I am interested in Childhood Psychology, I adjusted my goals and aspirations and am now turning to my backup plan for a career in HR. I also had to readjust my plans as my overseas exchange programme to Seoul National University together with a good friend — I have always been very interested in Korean culture and even studied the language at NUS. One week after we arrived in Seoul, we were told to return to Singapore because of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that point, I really felt like my dreams were shattered.

Career-wise, what had you hoped to find — and what could have you been dealt with in reality?

CLARYL HO JIA LE: Indeed, it isn’t just about the degree, but also getting to experience campus life, and going on exchange overseas — these are also important, formative parts of university life, which I looked forward to. I was very excited to enroll in an exchange programme to Seoul National University together with a good friend — I have always been very interested in Korean culture and even studied the language at NUS. Yet just one week after we arrived in Seoul, we were told to return to Singapore because of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that point, I really felt like my dreams were shattered.

Le Khuc Hoang Uyen: A holistic college experience was very big for me too. I am very practical, and being on scholarship, I was focused on my academic results. However, I also wanted to see what I can get out of a university education: which is the ability to learn independently, rather than from textbooks or through a class.

Ms Le Khuc Hoang Uyen: Being on scholarship, I already have a job upon graduation. However, some of my friends have not been able to get the jobs they want, while others settled with traineeships. That said, the demand for social workers is quite high now and there are many opportunities out there in the market — though often at a lower starting pay than it would be for say, Engineering graduates. It is a physically and psychologically demanding job and we do feel like we deserve more.

Shaun: I have been preparing myself to get into a marketing or communications role and have sent out 100 applications since last November, ahead of my graduation. However, I have only been called for three interviews so far! The way I see it, the batch of Business graduates before me had to take the brunt of the pandemic as the world was grappling with such rapid change — we, on the other hand, had one year to

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Ms Claryl Ho Jia Le
At a glance, the expectations of our generation are pegged to the current state of social and economic progress. We look at the playing field now and set our own benchmarks based on it. Similarly, the older generation would have had their own benchmarks in their time.

**SHAWN:** Different generations face different challenges: it is hard to say who has it easier or harder. The older generation had more bread-and-butter considerations, but for us, it is more about personal aspirations, and societal and family expectations. Failure is not acceptable! (Laughs)

For graduates today, it’s not just about seeking a job, but a good job.

**UYEN:** As much as our generation has our “Why me?” moments, we move on and learn to deal with what we have. Resilience isn’t just about hardcore strength, but adaptability and flexibility. Prior to the pandemic, I had been a typical introvert and a planner. This period has taught me that there are many external factors that you cannot plan for: you can only prime yourself to be ready for change. If anything, the challenges we face make us better and stronger — we certainly are not “snowflakes.”

**Do you see the shift towards working and studying being a permanent change?**

**JOTHINADAN:** Working from home is a new challenge that I am concerned about. As a new team member in a company, you need to build relationships with the people you work with in order to have rapport, to align, or even just to call in a favour. The move towards virtual communications in the workplace makes building strong relationships quite difficult. This is what I found, contrasting the two internships I did — one in my second year, when it was still business as usual, and one at the end of Year Three which started off with WFH arrangements and ended during Phase 2 last year, when we could finally go into the office on certain days.

**ADIL:** As a Psychology student, online learning and research is a con. But as a member of the workforce, I have observed that while my company used to conduct annual trips to the different markets to hold learning sessions, transferring our operations online has allowed teams from different markets to be in closer communication than before. It has also allowed for better consolidation and sharing of knowledge.

**UYEN:** During my six-month internship at IBM, I enjoyed a very good learning environment with a pipeline of projects. Yet when the pandemic hit, we had to cancel some of these campaigns and projects, and it limited my scope of work. That said, being in a MNC meant that we were able to shift our attention and jump into other markets that I previously wasn’t handling. I ended up liaising with the APAC team a lot, which opened up new opportunities too.

**Amid grappling with uncertainty and dealing with new norms, is there a silver lining that you see?**

**UYEN:** While I had to stay back for a term due to my cancelled exchange, the leave of absence felt like a long vacation and made me reflect on what I want in life. For so long I was fixated on a future in Japan, and I was bonded to work in Singapore, but had to be open if the opportunity presented itself. This is what I found, contrasting the two internships I did — one in my second year, when it was still business as usual, and one at the end of Year Three which started off with WFH arrangements and ended during Phase 2 last year, when we could finally go into the office on certain days.

**AQIL:** While I had to stay back for a term due to my cancelled exchange, I was able to stay at home with my family. I was thankful for the quiet time to reflect and recharge while I was in Singapore, so that I can be prepared when the opportunity finally comes. And if it never comes, I could still stay in Singapore and continue to do what I am doing. It’s about constantly managing expectations and aspirations, but still working towards what you really want.

**UYEN:** I am bonded to work in Singapore, but had originally hoped to get a more regional role — I am guessing that won’t happen anytime soon! But what Agil said makes sense: when the laws of maximising gains are not applicable, one should aim to minimise loss by gaining as much experience as possible — be it through internships, signing up for courses and mentorship programmes, or building your network online. When things are moving at a slower pace, it is a good time to build yourself.

**What about hopes of working abroad?**

**JOTHINADAN:** A friend applied for, and secured, a position in Sweden and will be heading over in July. The Singapore Government has also been supportive in fast-tracking his vaccination appointment, which helped to facilitate things abroad. I would say that while working overseas is more difficult now, it is not impossible.

**CLAYR:** My friend is also starting a consulting role in Copenhagen. It depends on luck in some parts, and your access to opportunities — which is not equal for all. We just have to deal with the cards that we are dealt with.

**ADIL:** I have always wanted to work in Japan, and am now doing my internship with a Japanese HR consultancy. That said, I would say the earliest I might be able to go back to Japan would be in... five years? (Laugh) But I am focusing on gaining more experience, and looking for as many opportunities as possible to learn about business practices in Japan while I am in Singapore, so that I can be prepared when the opportunity finally comes. And if it never comes, I could still stay in Singapore and continue to do what I am doing. It’s about constantly managing expectations and aspirations, but still working towards what you really want.

**UYEN:** Amid grappling with uncertainty and dealing with new norms, is there a silver lining that you see? After all, while I had to stay back for a term due to my cancelled exchange, the leave of absence felt like a long vacation and made me reflect on what I want in life. For so long I was fixated on a future in Japan, and I was bonded to work in Singapore, but had to be open if the opportunity presented itself. This is what I found, contrasting the two internships I did — one in my second year, when it was still business as usual, and one at the end of Year Three which started off with WFH arrangements and ended during Phase 2 last year, when we could finally go into the office on certain days.

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The Comfort of a Call Home

How empathy drove Mr David Chia (Yale-NUS ’17) to find a solution for a problem he had never experienced before.

I took it for granted that my family would know how to pick up my WhatsApp call or join a group video call. But there was a sense of empathy that drove me to act. What if we couldn’t reach them? How would we feel?

ADAPTING AN IDEA

Thankfully, Mr Chia did not have to devise a solution from scratch. Realising that they could help alleviate the migrant workers’ challenges, he and three friends decided to adapt a tech solution they had developed during a hackathon earlier that year to the present situation. This initial solution had targeted another demographic often underserviced by tech: Singapore’s large community of seniors. But the group of four quickly pivoted their idea — and along came Call Home. Powered by cloud communications platform Twilio, the app allows 3G-to-landline calls. This means that workers can use the internet to call landlines back home.

“To make a call, they go to a website on their phone and log in with a Facebook or Google ID.”

This experience has put me in touch with other people around my age who are as passionate in bringing about change as I am.

SUCCESS CALLING

Despite the enthusiastic response, the team faced some challenges. For one, Twilio is not a free platform; each call has a fixed cost. Mr Chia and his team have tapped on their personal networks of friends and contacts to help build a sustainable funding model for Call Home so that the costs passed on to the migrant workers are minimal. Twilio.org, the social impact arm of Twilio, supports the initiative by offering a heavily-discounted rate for its services, bringing down the costs of calls by more than half.

The remaining amount is covered through partnerships with corporates and voluntary welfare organisations. For instance, a partnership with Facebook pays for all the calls made by workers constructing the tech giant’s data centres in Singapore. The Call Home team has also started a fund-raising campaign on GIVE.asia, which hopes to raise $100,000 for their service. This sum will allow 10,000 workers to access Call Home for free throughout the year. Given the large sums of money they were raising, they valued accountability. “Batter-up, which is a non-profit volunteer-run organisation that promotes tech-for-good, approached us and offered to adopt us, which we readily agreed to,” he recalls.

DISCOVERING COMMUNITIES

Though he is no longer heavily involved in the day-to-day running of Call Home, Mr Chia still gives the occasional input. The experience, says, has been an eye-opening one. “Mr Yale-NUS, I was exposed to many people who had ideas about making a difference. Yet your priorities change when you start working,” he reflects. “But this experience has put me in touch with other people around my age who are as passionate in bringing about change as I am.”

It is not just the do-good community that Mr Chia has been exposed to. He has also learnt a lot about the migrant workers who have toiled thanklessly to build today’s Singapore. Recalling one of the most memorable moments of the project, he says, “One of my teammates was going to meet some of the workers for the first time and she told me that she was a little nervous. At that point, I wore my ‘anthropology major’ hat and told her to blend in and they would welcome her more than she thought they would. And they did just that! At the end of the session, she told me, ‘I can’t believe how welcoming they were. They did not see me as ‘the other’; they just offered me food and received me with open arms.’”

Call Home has caught the eye of the Singapore Business Review, which conferred the MOBILE AWARD FOR TELECOMMUNICATIONS on the service. Its website, CallHome.sg, supports the initiative by offering a heavily-discounted rate for its services, bringing down the costs of calls by more than half.

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It was praised by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat at the Smart Nation & Digital Government Conference in March.

More than 1,000 users use Call Home every month.

The ALUMNUS

JUL–SEP 2021

The Comfort of a Call Home

How empathy drove Mr David Chia (Yale-NUS ’17) to find a solution for a problem he had never experienced before.

I took it for granted that my family would know how to pick up my WhatsApp call or join a group video call. But there was a sense of empathy that drove me to act. What if we couldn’t reach them? How would we feel?

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A Digital Transformation of the Performing Arts

In the light of social distancing restrictions caused by the pandemic, creative expression on campus gets a new lifeline in the virtual space.
When I was younger, I thought businesses just spent a lot of time drinking and entertaining — stuff that you would see in old Hong Kong dramas. Then I attended the University of Pennsylvania on the NUS Overseas Colleges (NOC) work-study programme, and it opened my eyes to tech entrepreneurship, which went beyond the usual buying-and-selling, to creating something almost out of nothing through research and development. Meeting tech entrepreneurs at Wharton Business School during my second year, one of my tutors, Professor Casey Chan, noticed when I was rejected for NOC at the end of my third year, NUS also taught me the value of relationships. 

Dealing with human relations has been consistently difficult for me, but it is something that I need to work hard on. I believe in the Chinese saying “天赋固然入”, to be at the right place, at the right time, with the right conditions, and with the right people. We now enjoy market leadership advantages and a favourable international and domestic environment with the increased need for market intelligence; we also have the resources and capital. Now it’s up to us to achieve harmony between the right group of people so that we can all help each other and head towards the same direction.

Pursuit of Excellence

The Software Report, Mr Tiong was awarded the SCS IT Leaders Award in 2019 and Ernst &Young’s Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2018.

I don’t really get a huge sense of achievement from building PatSnap. My mind is simply focused on moving from one milestone to another, and each day I am still putting out fires, each bigger than the last as the company grows. Yet I can serve as an inspiration to others, that’s something I can feel good about. I read a lot of biographies while I was growing up: from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison to Zheng He and Yuefei. And as a youth who loved basketball, I would learn all about Michael Jordan. People need role models, and if people can look at me and say, “Wow, if a normal dude like Jeffrey Tiong can do this, maybe I can, too,” then I would have contributed to the local landscape.

A curiosity to learn and an excitement about all things new keeps me going, and my education at NUS has equipped me with the skills to continue my lifelong learning. One of the professors I interacted with in NUS told me that the university is a place to learn how to learn. Indeed, while we might forget what has been taught once we pass our exams, the critical thinking skills — from how to identify and solve a problem, to ways of gaining relevant, reliable information — stay with us for life.

NUS also taught me the value of relationships. When I was rejected for NOC at the end of my third year, one of my tutors, Professor Casey Chan, noticed when I was asked what the matter was. I told him about the situation, how I would soon have to start on my Final Year Project, and would thus have no further opportunities to go for the NOC programme. This was pivotal as Prof Chan made a personal recommendation to the NOC Director and eventually helped me get into the programme. I realised the impact one can make on the lives of others — this is why I continue to work hard. The company is a collective — if I can look back and say that I built meaningful relationships, and we had a good fight, then it’s worth it.

I always say that PatSnap goes around with a “Made in Singapore” stamp. But there’s a “Made in NUS” stamp on it too. From giving me the skills to lifelong learning, opening my eyes through the NOC programme, to investing in PatSnap in the nascent stages, NUS has played a critical role in the evolution of this company. I dare say that PatSnap would not have existed without NUS.
Searching for a New Sensation

Assistant Professor Benjamin C. K. Tee from the NUS Department of Materials Science and Engineering, and Institute for Health Innovation & Technology, regularly makes the news with his innovations — which range from self-healing electronic skin to a foam that emulates the human sense of touch. After all, Assistant Professor Benjamin C. K. Tee leads the Sensor.AI Systems Labs at the Department of Materials Science and Engineering. He earned his PhD in Electrical Engineering from Stanford University in 2013, and was a Stanford BioDesign Global Innovation Fellow in 2014. The winner of the Singapore Young Scientist Award in 2016, he received the NRF Fellowship the following year, and in 2019 was recognised as the WEF Young Scientist of the Year. AssProf Tee has more than 10 patents to his name, and serves on the IEEE Electron Devices Society Flexible Electronics and Displays committee and the Materials Research Society Singapore Committee.

The Empire Strikes Back. The scene in question of course is tied to the film’s shocking climax, when the hero Luke Skywalker loses his hand in a duel with the villainous Darth Vader. He receives a prosthetic replacement, which the film’s creator George Lucas showed us allows him to feel, exactly as if the robotic limb is his own hand. AssProf Tee cites this as his eureka moment; he was seven at the time. He later realised that there was an opportunity there. “When you lose your sense of touch, you essentially become numb...and prosthetics users face that problem,” he told journalists at CNA. “So by recreating an artificial version of the skin, they can hold a hand, and feel that it is soft and warm. They can feel how hard they are holding that hand.”

Continuing on the theme bringing science fiction into science fact, AssProf Tee explains that artificial skin can actually move into “superhuman” territory, because it is not limited by biology. There is even a sustainability angle, which is where that example of the smartphone touchscreen comes into the picture. “Your phone’s touchscreen is essentially like an artificial skin,” says AssProf Tee. “If we can engineer it to repair itself, we can cut down on electronic waste.” This is a useful reminder that artificial skin and its related technologies that AssProf Tee is developing at NUS cut across multiple disciplines, offering benefits to robotics, medicine and even consumer goods.

In the example of prosthetics, the challenge remains how artificial skin connects with the human nervous system. AssProf Tee says that he and his team are riding the wave of improvements in neurotechnological interfaces to offer an advantage in terms of speed. For the record, the artificial skin developed by AssProf Tee is already capable of transmitting information more efficiently than anything in our own body. The hurdle remains at the level of integrating all that potential with our nervous system, but that does not mean the artificial skin will not have an immediate practical impact. “Think of it this way: we are now at the stage of the 5Gbps dial-up modem,” he says. “It will take maybe 10 years (for the human-machine interface), but we already have practical applications in robotics.”

I want to see the research that I do have an impact in the world, and prosthetics was quite obvious. (in shaping which areas of engineering and the fields of biology and medicine).” It is for this reason that AssProf Tee hopes more students will consider the broad range of engineering disciplines. Computer science may be the popular choice, but the world still needs specialists in materials science and electrical engineering too. Showcasing his keen concern for real-world application, AssProf Tee asserts that no matter what technology develops in a particular field, one needs to rope in experts from other fields to realise the practical benefits. One thing is for certain: there are plenty more multidisciplinary innovations on the way from AssProf Tee and his team, as they strive to take the ‘fiction’ out of science fiction.
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E7 – Engineering’s New Home of Tech-Driven Healthcare

09 February

In the heart of South-East Asia’s leading university, a new home for tech-driven healthcare is taking shape. Having opened in early 2021, E7 is a state-of-the-art building in the centre of the NUS campus that is set to become a world-leading hub for the development of affordable and accessible medical technology.

Spread across 8 stories and more than 16,000 square metres, E7 bridges the fields of engineering and medicine. Combining technology and innovation, it is poised to be a hub for high-impact collaboration between top researchers and industry. It will also drive the invention of pioneering healthcare technology, from early concept ideas through incubation and on to commercialisation. Students, researchers, scientists and engineers will work in what will be some of the most technologically-advanced labs in the world. Here in E7, NUS will be bringing together a formidable team, ready to take on the world’s biggest healthcare challenges.

“With this diversity of expertise, we are not only making cutting-edge technologies of today; we are also empowering patient care for tomorrow.”
– Assistant Professor Shao Huilin, Biomedical Engineering.

“E7 is poised to be a hub for high-impact collaboration between top researchers and industry. It will also drive the invention of pioneering healthcare technology, from early concept ideas through incubation and on to commercialisation.”
– Associate Professor Raye Yeow (Engineering ’05), Biomedical Engineering.

“The key mission of E7 is to drive a paradigm shift in healthcare, from a focus on symptom-based treatment to one that encompasses disease prediction, early diagnosis and intervention. To achieve this, we will focus on key technology areas such as digital medicine, theranostics and robotics. With this deeper connection with our clinical partners, we will look at their pain points across multiple levels, and develop and translate needs-driven holistic innovations that can advance the healthcare sector both locally and globally.”
– Professor Dean Ho, Head of Engineering’s New Home of Tech-Driven Healthcare.

NUS Engineering Alumni Award Ceremony

On 5 February, the NUS Engineering Alumni Awards Ceremony took place at the NUSS Kent Ridge Guild House. While typically held as part of the annual NUS Engineering Gala Dinner, the event was scaled to meet current safe distancing restrictions.

Despite the novel arrangement, guests had fun catching up with one another and with faculty. Professor Aaron Voon-Yew Thean, Dean of NUS Engineering, shared his appreciation to all who joined in to celebrate the achievements of esteemed alumni from the Faculty of Engineering.

Recipients of this year’s Awards include:

- Distinguished Engineering Alumni Award recipient, Mr. Ngien Hoon Ping, Chief Executive Officer (Supply Chain Business) of FairPrice Group, who graduated with a Master of Science in Industrial and Systems Engineering in 2004.
- Outstanding Engineering Young Alumni Award recipient, Ms. Eng Se-Hsieng, Senior Vice President (Business Development) of SkyLab Services Pte Ltd, who received her Bachelor’s (with a Minor in Information Systems) and Master’s degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering in 2002 and 2003 respectively as part of the NUS-French Grande Ecoles Double Degree Programme.
- Outstanding Engineering Young Alumni Award recipient, Mr. Tai Xu Hong, Director & Co-founder of Momentus Research Pte Ltd and WOW Kampung Pte Ltd, who received his Bachelor’s degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering from NUS in 2010, with a Minor in Technopreneurship as part of NUS Overseas College Stockholm which he joined in 2007.

More about their accomplishments can be found at NUS Engineering website.

www.linkedin.com/school/nus-engineering
NUS Geography Majors Tea 2021

19 February

“Across Space and Time” was the theme for the NUS Geography Majors Tea 2021 as two alumni from the Department of Geography, spanning both space and time, were invited as guest speakers. Mr Christopher Soh (Arts and Social Sciences ‘16), currently based in San Francisco, joined the audience via Zoom.

Physical distance notwithstanding, the students and faculty members who attended the event were enlighten by Mr Soh and Mr Chiang’s insights on working in Singapore and abroad; as well as the differences between the civil sector and the corporate world. Mr Soh is currently a Senior Associate at KPMG Singapore dealing with Sustainability Services, while Mr Chiang is a Product Analyst with Postmates Inc. Since the late 1990s, the Department of Geography has invited outstanding alumni to speak at either the Geography Career Talk or the Geography Majors Tea. After the 2021 Geography Majors Tea, an undergraduate commented, “It is most inspiring to hear alumni talk about how their [education in geography] has literally brought them across space and time.”

NUS BIZAlum MBA Mentorship Programme Launch 2021

The six-month NUS MBA Mentorship Programme for the January 2021 intake officially launched on 26 March 2021, as Professor Andy Rose, Dean of NUS Business School, kicked off the event with his welcome address. Mr George Heng, Director of NUS Business School Alumni, introduced Mr Yeo Keng Joon (MBA ‘85), the Founding President of NUS Business School Alumni. Mr Yeo graciously agreed to extend a personal loan to me to fund my last 2 years of medical school. With his generous contribution, I was able to graduate with my MD at age 44, and fulfill my lifelong ambition to be a doctor. I am now about to embark on my Family Medicine Residency Program at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School – CentraState Hospital in New Jersey, USA.

There is a saying that “it takes a village to raise a child”. I believe it takes a village to raise a doctor. My journey to become a doctor was fraught with many challenges; however, through each obstacle, numerous individuals have helped me. I am very thankful that I am an alumna of NUS as I have received help from fellow NUS Alumni who have believed in me and my determination to change my career from that of a chemical engineer to one of a medical doctor. The NUS community is truly the village that has helped to raise me up to be the doctor that I have longed to be. Mr Yeo once shared with me that “We should share our blessings when we are able”. I will pay it forward by contributing to the NUS Alumni Bursary Fund to help other needy students in NUS.

LIVING THE DREAM

Newly-minted physician Dr Aida Eliza Binte Abdul Majid (Engineering ‘00) recounts her journey to fulf l a childhood ambition of becoming a medical practitioner — one that was made possible through the help of generous fellow alumni.

Ever since I was a child, I have always dream of being a doctor. I was inspired by my parents who were both dedicated nurses. At age 17, despite meeting the requisite requirements, I was not accepted into NUS Medicine. I went ahead to pursue a degree in Chemical Engineering in NUS. After graduation, I held on to my desire to help others through my career as a secondary school Chemistry teacher and through charity work which included a volunteer mission to build a tuberculosis ward in Cambodia.

Despite enjoying a very fulfilling teaching career, I still held on to my dream of being a physician. At the age of 38, I decided to leave teaching and move to New York City as the first step towards my journey to becoming a doctor. I started a post-baccalaureate pre-med programme at Columbia University and used my life savings to fund my education. In 2017, I was accepted into the Keith B. Taylor Global Scholars Program at St. George’s University School of Medicine, in Grenada in the West Indies.

The cost of attending medical school is very high. My parents actually sold our family home to help fund my first two years of the course. However, at the end of my second year, I faced a significant funds deficit after multiple loan and scholarship applications failed. I reached out to friends back home in Singapore, and started a Gofundme campaign. I received many generous donations from friends and family from all over the world. My friends, Mr Kelvin Eu (MBA ’12) and Ms Serena Wan Shi Mei, through their involvements with NUS alumni, introduced me to Mr Yeo Keng Joon (MBA ’85), the Founding President of NUS Business School Alumni. Mr Yeo graciously agreed to extend a personal loan to me to fund my last 2 years of medical school. With his generous contribution, I was able to graduate with my MD at age 44, and fulfill my lifelong ambition to be a doctor. I am now about to embark on my Family Medicine Residency Program at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School – CentraState Hospital in New Jersey, USA.

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Mr Tan Chi Siong
Chief, M Tech Digital Leadership Programme

“MDL provides me with an in-depth learning structure to better understand my role, collaborate with technical stakeholders and learn how digital businesses work. Integrating new skills to my capstone project has further equipped me to lead digital transformation for healthcare more effectively.”

Dr Ng Yih Yng
Participant, Class of 2021
Lead, Digital and Smart Health Office,
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His time at the University has put Mr Jensen Goh (Engineering '17) on track to becoming a highly sought-after coach in the world of esports.

The motto of the University’s Tembusu College, “HOME OF POSSIBILITIES”, has stuck with Mr Jensen Goh (Engineering ’17) all these years. In fact, it propelled him to a career that he never thought was possible, as the head coach of an American esports team. “Right before I entered NUS, I told myself that it was time to get serious about making much progress, I decided that maybe an esports career wasn’t for me.”

That would have been the end of his esports journey — had he not stumbled upon a tournament organised by Tembusu College for Dota, a popular strategy video game. “I knew I was pretty decent at gaming but not living up to the expectations I had set for myself. I was a bit of a gamer, but not the best,” he recalls with a laugh.

Fortunately, Mr Goh completed his project on designs for a smart dustbin and graduated that year. Recognising his passion, his parents supported his decision to enter the arena full-time and he has since coached teams across seven countries.

In fact, it propelled him to a career that he never thought was possible. “My family, school and then esports. So I wasn’t about to mess up school for the sake of esports.”

For the first four months of that year, he stayed in Taiwan, where he juggled coaching commitments with his final-year project. “My parents were worried that I wouldn’t be able to graduate,” he admits. “But my priorities were (in this order): family, school and then esports. So I wasn’t about to mess up school for the sake of esports.”

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Mr Goh (standing in grey suit) is a popular shoutcaster, which is a commentator of esports. He found he had a knack for making complicated gaming concepts easy for laypeople to follow. His popularity as a commentator, known in esports circles as a “shoutcaster”, grew after he won a commenting competition later that year. Armed with this win, Mr Goh started making in serious money, earning up to $1,000 for each commentary session. He then ventured into coaching amateur esports teams and struck gold in 2017, when he was asked to coach a professional Taiwanese League of Legends team, Fireball. For the first four months of that year, he stayed in Taiwan, where he juggled coaching commitments with his final-year project. “My parents were worried that I wouldn’t be able to graduate,” he admits. “But my priorities were (in this order): family, school and then esports. So I wasn’t about to mess up school for the sake of esports.”

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Insurance Policies
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RE:IMAGINE

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