

Teaching undergraduates the art of survival in unsettled times

What happens when a university sends its students into the real world to see if they can act and adapt when there is no obvious script to follow?

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At a recent job interview, a candidate was asked a question that would have been unthinkable not long ago: What can you do that ChatGPT cannot? It was posed half in jest, but only half. Elsewhere, we still hear the familiar complaint that students today are the “strawberry generation” – easily bruised, quick to wilt, reluctant to endure discomfort.

These two anxieties are usually treated separately. They should not be. If machines can now perform a growing number of routine cognitive tasks, and if the world our students are entering is more volatile than that faced by previous generations, then the qualities that matter most are no longer simply speed, polish or the ability to produce the correct

answer on demand. They are judgment, resilience, empathy, adaptability and the confidence to act when there is no obvious script to follow.

Before we mock students for being anxious, we should be honest about the world we have handed them.

This is a generation whose formative years were shaped by Covid-19. They have watched a land war return to Europe with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. They are inheriting a climate crisis that has moved from abstraction to lived reality. And now they are told that artificial intelligence may reorder entire professions before they have even entered them.

The situation is serious enough that labour chief Ng Chee Meng filed a parliamentary motion on May 5, calling for no “jobless growth” amid AI disruption. Among other things, he asked for reassurance that young people would be helped to manage a “less anxious transition” from

school to work.

Add to this talk of tariffs, recession and geopolitical fragmentation, and it is hardly surprising that many young people feel less that they are climbing a ladder and more as if they are trying to clamber up an increasingly greasy pole.

OUTDATED MODEL

Yet much of our educational model still reflects an older world. It is built around achievement, optimisation and the avoidance of mistakes. In Singapore, that tendency is reinforced by the harsher edge of meritocracy. Meritocracy has real virtues — it opens doors through talent and effort rather than birth or patronage. But it also trains students to be acutely sensitive to evaluation. They learn, very quickly, that errors can be costly. The result is not indolence but caution.

We tell students to be bold, entrepreneurial and innovative, while educating them to be strategic, careful and afraid of getting things wrong.

We need to be more honest with our students. The future they are entering will not reward only those who make the fewest mistakes. It will reward those who

can recover from them, learn from them, and exercise judgment when rules run out.

Universities should therefore be places where students can test ideas, revise them, defend them, and sometimes abandon them. Not because standards do not matter, but because they do. In a world that keeps changing in ways we cannot predict, excellence cannot mean only flawless performance under controlled conditions.

This is why we are wary of a new kind of solutionism in our response to artificial intelligence. Singapore is right to invest in AI capability. Students do need to understand how these tools work and how to use them well.

But fluency is not education. A university that teaches students merely to prompt more efficiently may be preparing them for the very layer of work most vulnerable to automation. The harder question is not whether they can use the tools. It is whether they know what to ask, what to doubt, what matters, and what ought not to be done at all.

Or to put it differently: the key questions for students are not only “What is your value?” but “What are your values?”

In a world where machines can generate plausible answers

instantly, judgment becomes more important, not less. So too does the ability to work in Lombok as well as London, to build trust with unlikeminded peers from all walks of life, and to understand the human consequences of decisions for which certain outcomes can never be known.

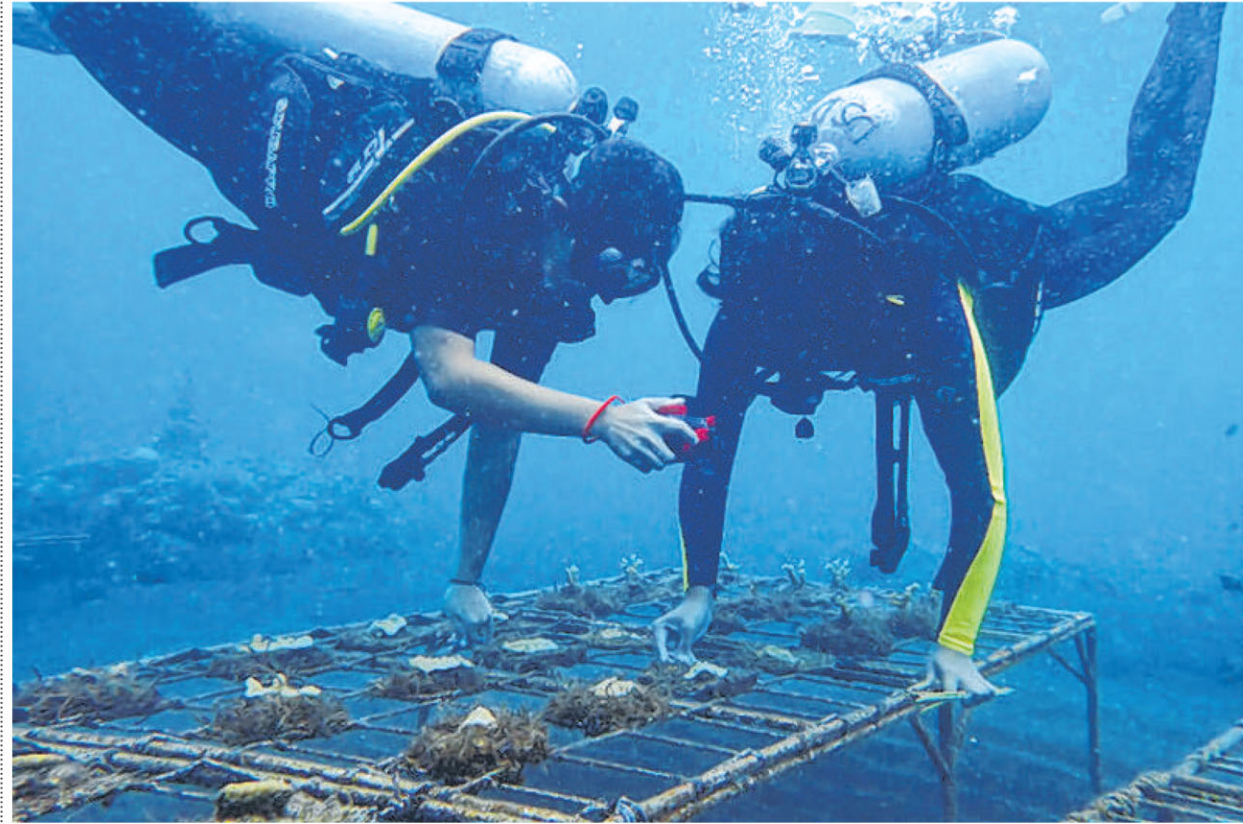
These are not decorative “soft skills” appended to a serious education. They are at the heart of one.

TASTE OF THE WORLD OUT THERE

Together, we have grappled with these and other challenges since the creation of NUS College in 2022. When we were first mapping out our plans, a point of agreement was that we wanted students to look “beyond grades”. But when we tested that line on some actual students, however, they were unimpressed. It sounded, they said, like Ministry of Education propaganda.

Fair enough. Young people are quick to detect a slogan that asks them to transcend metrics while continuing to be judged by exactly those metrics.

The answer, then, is not to repeat the slogan more loudly. It is to build an environment in which students can actually live



NUS students worked alongside a fishing community in northern Bali to find a way to secure young corals to regeneration tables. Through this experience, they learnt that good solutions often emerge not from technical cleverness alone, but from patient listening, humility and collaboration. PHOTO: SAM SHU QIN

differently. That means creating space for experimentation before ideas are fully polished. It means discussion-based teaching that requires students to defend a position orally, listen carefully to disagreement, and change their minds when warranted. It means interdisciplinary work, because

the problems that matter most do not arrive neatly packaged by department. And it means allowing students to encounter difficulty without immediately trying to engineer it away. One of the most important ways we try to do this is by pushing students out into South-east Asia

– not as tourists, but as collaborators. Not recklessly, but deliberately. We try to give them enough support to be safe, but not so much that they are comfortable or complacent. Across South-east Asia, our students encounter communities, institutions and assumptions very

different from their own. They learn, quickly, that intelligence is not the same thing as familiarity, and that empathy is not a sentiment but a discipline.

Sometimes the lesson is concrete. A student team working with a fishing community in northern Bali, for example, was trying to find a way to secure young corals to regeneration tables. The eventual solution involved discarded coconut husks, woven with local knowledge into something simple and effective. The point was not merely the ingenuity of the outcome. It was that good solutions often emerge not from technical cleverness alone, but from patient listening, humility and collaboration across difference.

That, in the end, is part of what students can do that ChatGPT cannot. They can exercise judgment. They can build trust. They can persuade, adapt, and care. They can venture beyond the familiar and come back knowing something the algorithm cannot be taught.

As the boxer Mike Tyson once said: everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face. If we truly want to prepare students for a world that makes a mockery of plans, we should stop pretending that more technique alone will suffice.

The task of a university today is not to produce graduates who never make mistakes. It is to form people capable of courage, empathy and sound judgment in a world that will make a mockery of perfect plans.

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