The road ahead

Valedictorians from the Class of 2019 share how NTU has shaped them as individuals and primed them to make contributions to society.

Dressed out in navy gowns, brightly-coloured hoods and mortar boards, more than 9,400 graduands celebrated a milestone in their lives with their family and friends at some 20 convocation ceremonies in NTU.

Two-thirds of the graduating cohort comprised Bachelor’s degree recipients, with the remainder made up of individuals completing their Masters or doctoral programme studies. 2019 also marks the first time NTU recognised and welcomed its PhD graduates into its academy of scholars with a separate hooding ceremony, a new tradition instituted by the University’s leadership.

Among the graduating class, 37 were recipients of the Lee Kuan Yew Gold Medal—awarded to students for their display of academic excellence. 17 graduands also received the Koh Boon Hwee Scholars Award, which recognises exemplary students and the faculty members who have played a significant part in their NTU journey.

In his opening speech, NTU President Professor Subra Suresh expressed certainty that the education graduands received at NTU will help them in their future endeavours. “Today, our graduates leave NTU with the knowledge that their education has prepared them to excel in whatever career path they choose to pursue,” he said. "They are equipped with the skills and values that will enable them to succeed in the journey ahead.”

For some graduates, this journey has already begun. Despite uncertainties surrounding the outlook of Singapore’s economy and labour market, seven in 10 NTU graduates have secured a job before graduation, with some even receiving multiple job offers from multinational corporations.

Also, to recognise the contributions of individuals who have helped shape NTU into an institute of excellence, two honorary doctorate degrees of the University’s highest honour were conferred at the convocation ceremonies. One recipient was Mrs Margaret Lien, a local philanthropist who has contributed to multiple initiatives at NTU, including the Margaret Lien Centre for Professional Success. The other was Professor Sir Keith O’Nions, Chair of Cambridge Enterprise Ltd, for his contribution towards setting up the NTU Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine in collaboration with Imperial College London, UK.

As the Class of 2019 joins the growing NTU Alumni family, NTULink spoke to five valedictorians about their learning journey at the University and their ambitions for the future.
Edward Yee Yew Fai
Double Degree, Business (Banking & Finance) and Accountancy, Class of 2019

One of 17 Koh Boon Hwee Scholars Award recipients this year, Mr Edward Yee confessed that he was not always the academic high-achiever, having struggled with his studies in the past due to dyslexia. But a steely resolve and compassion for those in need has seen him soar to become the valedictorian of the Nanyang Business School’s Class of 2019, Singapore’s first Rhodes Scholar in 14 years, and a co-founder of his own non-profit organisation, Givfunds Social Ventures.

From completing an internship at Silicon Valley to visiting social businesses in Bangladesh, Mr Yee honed strong instincts in social entrepreneurship and cemented his desire to give back to society. In fact, it was in Bangladesh that Mr Tan met Professor Muhammad Yunus, the winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, and became motivated to kickstart his own social entrepreneurship journey. Via Givfunds Social Ventures, Mr Yee plans to provide social entrepreneurs across South Asia with access to capital, empowering them to improve the lives of those in need.

Concurrently, Mr Yee will be embarking on a double Master’s degree programme at the University of Oxford under the Rhodes Scholarship, reading social data science and evidence-based social intervention and policy evaluation. Grateful for the opportunities that have helped him carve out his own path in life, he said, “Beyond imparting me with knowledge, NTU has taught me how to learn, and has instilled in me values that I will carry with me for life.”

Aisyah Binte Yusoff
Bachelor of Arts (Sociology with Second Major in Public Policy and Global Affairs), Class of 2019

With a fervent passion for research in the social sciences, Ms Aisyah Binte Yusoff is chasing her dreams of becoming a world-class social scientist. Of the many doors that NTU has opened to her, Ms Aisyah counts her overseas exchange at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, US, as one of the most meaningful experiences she has had as an undergraduate.

“The independence and freedom I had while on exchange gave me elbow room for personal development and growth,” she said. Beyond the challenging classes, she recalled participating enthusiastically in public marches, going on road trips and exploring national parks, forging many friendships along the way. “Studying at Bryn Mawr and travelling around the US made me realise the beauty in diversity, and that connectedness underpins our existence.”

Her appreciation of diversity was reflected in her final-year thesis, which focused on the niqabi population in Singapore—a community that chooses to wear a face veil.

“Be it through my research or volunteer work, I hope to allay fears that society may have towards such marginalised groups,” she emphasised, adding that she will be pursuing a Master of Philosophy in social anthropology at Cambridge University, UK.

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LEARNING FOR LIFE

Tan He Jiang
Double Degree, Aerospace Engineering and Economics, Class of 2019

“Failure is only certain if we fail to even try.”

As the sun began to set and rain fell over the green foliage in Malaysia’s Lambir Hills National Park, Ms Jessie Gan Hui Sze felt despair seep in. Her group had gotten lost in the forest during a summer forest research experience organised by NTU’s Asian School of the Environment (ASE).

“To make things worse, I started getting muscle cramps in both my legs as we were going uphill,” she recounted. Fortunately, she and her fellow adventurers managed to navigate themselves back to human civilisation unscathed.

“I still go back to that moment whenever I feel defeated, and I know that I will have the strength and courage to push through,” she quipped.

Besides the summer forest research experience, Ms Gan was also involved in a crab rescue and research programme as an undergraduate. Of the many mentors she has had, her final year project supervisor, Dr Shawn Kaichokalani Lum of ASE, left the greatest impact on her. “I went on countless field trips to different parts of Singapore and overseas with him. I have always been really amazed by how knowledgeable he is.”

Feeling ready to step out into the world, Ms Gan hopes to make it a better place using the knowledge and experiences she has gained at NTU. “By focusing on the environment, I hope to improve our current situation and make sustainable development a reality,” she said.

A FORCE FOR NATURE

Jessie Gan Hui Sze
Bachelor of Science (Environmental Earth Systems Science), Class of 2019

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With the smarts for artificial intelligence (AI), Mr Joshi Chaitanya Krishna fits right in with the vibrant technology ecosystem that is growing in Singapore and around the world. In fact, he already had a taste of applying AI to real-world challenges when he organised and participated in hackathons as an undergraduate. But beyond problem solving and building technical expertise, Mr Joshi cherished the network that arose from such competitions. “The hackathons were a great place to meet passionate people and form a like-minded community,” he said, adding that he was glad to have contributed towards growing the University’s hackathon participation rate from just 70 contenders during the initial years to over 250 in its latest iteration.

He credits NTU’s unique pedagogy for helping him thrive in his journey of maturation and personal growth, one which has helped prepare him better for the future. “The opportunities at NTU go beyond conventional classroom teaching; they have helped me to become a leader and broadened my cultural horizons by allowing me to make lifelong friends around the world,” he said.

Staying true to his passion, Mr Joshi is now a research assistant at NTU in the lab of Associate Professor Xavier Bresson, a world-leading expert in AI. “In the future, I want to use AI to solve real-world problems for society, and I hope to continue building my skillset in both research and engineering,” he concluded.