



What's After
SPM?

101 stories,
101 young Malaysians

Foreword by Roshan Thiran

What's After SPM

written by 101 Malaysians for Malaysians



Foreword by
Roshan Thiran

Design by
Esther Tham
Charis Loke
Lisanne Yeoh

Brought to you by



Leaderonomics
The Science of Building Leaders

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Printed in Malaysia

ISBN Number: 978-983-44854-1-2

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia
Roshan Thiran/Leaderonomics Publishing
What's After SPM/101 Malaysians

Published by Leaderonomics Publishing:

Leaderonomics Sdn. Bhd.

Suite 11.01 Block E

Phileo Damansara 1

9 Jalan 16/11, 46350 Petaling Jaya

Tel : +603 7957 5809 / 5804

Fax : +603 7957 5831

www.leaderonomics.com



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*To each of our friends and family...
this book is dedicated to your greatness!*



NOT FOR SALE

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NOT FOR SALE

Foreword

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...”

– **Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities**

Exactly one year after my SPM exams, I read ‘The Tale of Two Cities’ and remembered thinking to myself how aptly this description was of my current state of affairs. My story after SPM is filled with joyous and fun moments coupled with anger, confusion, fear and frustration.

My moments of joy and happiness began the moment I completed the last SPM paper and left my school till the day my SPM results came out. The moment my SPM results were out, my world turned upside down.

Well, to be fair, I also was somewhat frustrated after my SPM exams as I was the only person from my school batch who didn’t have a girlfriend, while all my other friends used to lug around their new-found “love of their lives” every time we met up. But that never bothered me too much as I was involving myself in some many wonderful things including starting my own business, helping out in youth camps, and working for an NGO. And I felt so powerful, yet so foolish, so impetuous and spontaneous, yet so resolved to ‘change the world.’

Then my SPM results came out. And the world changed suddenly. For me at least. The funny thing is I did really well for my SPM. I scored 7 A1’s and 1 C3 in the old days where we were limited to 8 or 9 subjects. I was not surprised as I somewhat knew I would do well but my relatives and friends were probably extremely surprised as they wondered when I found time to study as I spent the majority of my secondary school life playing football and

trying to ‘change the world’. But study I did (when my friends were out looking for girlfriends or wasting their time with their “trophies”).

Nevertheless, having good results really complicated matters. I decided deep down that I did not want to study in a local university and wanted to get one of those scholarships that were awarded. So, together with all my friends (who similarly resolved to escape Malaysia for the supposedly greener ‘academic’ shores elsewhere), we started to apply for every scholarship under the sun – from the JPA, Petronas, Renong and whatever else that was available back then. One by one, my friends, most of whom had lesser results than me, started to get scholarships to various countries, universities and prep schools. I went for interviews after interviews, but nothing came about.

I soon realised that I was a hopeless interviewee. I tended to ‘tell the truth’ during interviews and that was not apparently what the interviewers wanted to hear, especially on my fine act of balancing ‘changing the world’, sports and life with studies thrown into the fray occasionally. And so as the months ticked by, nothing came about. And then I had to face the inevitable – I had to go to FORM 6!

I could not believe it. It was a horrible time. I saw all my friends flying off or going to some private college or being prepped at some institution to be flown off to some exotic country like the UK, Australia, the US and France (well, for a person who had only travelled to 2 places outside of Malaysia all my life, everything was exotic outside the country!).

But I had to go back to the Methodist Boys’ School in Kuala Lumpur (MBS) and be part of the Form 6 class. The only consolation I had was the fact that at least in Form 6 there would be girls in the class (unlike the previous 5 years) so maybe there was some hope of filling up the ‘lack of a girlfriend’ void which was perpetuated by my friends who were then breaking up with their first girlfriends and having their 2nd and 3rd girlfriends.

So, I was off to Form 6, dreading the fact that I was the only one in my group of friends actually going back to MBS. And so, the exciting months

since the end of SPM suddenly turned into a depressing set of months that followed. I went to school but my heart and mind were jealously thinking of how 'lucky' my friends were while I was so unlucky and such a victim.

But this sad state of being a 'victim' didn't last long. My headmaster, a very strict disciplinarian, had taught me in my previous years as a student leader in MBS striving to 'change the world' that you must never be taken victim by circumstances. This was further reinforced numerous times by my former football coach at MBS, the legendary Mokhtar Dahari. He believed that bad things (in my case 'being stuck in MBS'!!) happened to everyone but our reaction to these circumstances defines great leaders. And watching Mokhtar Dahari as he battled the deadly disease that finally took his life, convinced me that I needed to take charge of my life and not be taken victim to whatever conditions surrounded me.

So, with this new resolve, I decided to dedicate the next few months of my life to 'getting out of Malaysia' somehow. I knew that I had to keep trying, as Mokhtar Dahari kept repeating to us, "everything requires hard work and perseverance". And so I worked tirelessly day and night to get into a foreign university.

I started getting university application forms, doing up my 'resume' and writing passionate letters to various universities on why they need to admit me into their school and pay for my education, food, lodging and everything else. I think I possibly spent my entire savings and earnings (did I mention that I had mini businesses giving tuition, and other stuff!) and the cash I received for getting good results (my father worked in the government and they have various cooperatives that reward government employees whose kids do well in their studies) on stamps and posting more than 1000 letters to universities all over the world.

Surprisingly, I got answers from many big universities. Harvard, Princeton and Georgetown said come join us but offered paltry scholarships which only covered 25% of the fees. As I knew my parents had no means to pay for the

rest (and little did I know that the government would actually pay for me if I ACTUALLY got into the top universities), I kept tirelessly applying to others.

Finally, a small university (well not so small!) in Connecticut, sent me a letter accepting me into their university, with a full scholarship covering everything from food, lodging, tuition and the works. All I had to do was fly over there. I still remember receiving the letter on December 18, 1992. By January 3rd, 1993, I was on a plane (where I met my future wife) ready to start school in Connecticut. My perseverance and diligence had paid off and I was off to start my new adventure in this exotic new place – New England!

When I arrived at the University of Bridgeport, I met the President of the university (as apparently I was one of the first students given this full scholarship) and then off I went to see my student advisor. His first question to me was “why are you at this university?” as he showed me that he knew about the fact that I had gained entrance to a few other ‘better’ universities. I answered that question with ease. Then he posed a second question, “so what do you want to study?”

I was stuck. I had no idea what I wanted to study or what career I wanted to pursue. I think my parents wanted me to be an engineer, others suggested being an accountant, and a whole host of ‘hot’ jobs that will make me successful. I looked at my student advisor, a man by the name of Professor Greenspan, and asked him a question instead, “tell me Professor, which is the easier course out there – something I can breeze through?” He looked back at me almost in anger and then composed himself and said, “Business – international business is easy.” And I looked back at him and said, “ok, I’ll do that then!”

And that settled it. I was going to study business. (A few days later I realised that Prof. Greenspan was a business professor and hence his recommendations).

After studying business and even after I graduated and got a job at General Electric (GE), I still had no idea what I wanted to do. In fact, my first boss decided that I was not good with numbers, so he insisted I take on

finance roles for the first part of my career at GE and hence I became a finance leader and later a CFO at GE. But even then I struggled to figure out what I really wanted to do and after my 7th role at GE, I finally figured out my passion and what I truly wanted in life.

Finding one's passion is never easy. Steve Jobs, CEO and co-founder of Apple, dropped out of college, disappointing his parents in the process because he *“had no idea what (he) wanted to do with life and no idea how college was going to help (him) figure it out.”* Steve worked at Atari briefly to save enough money to go to India to *“find his passion and calling.”* In India, Steve spent time with the surroundings and the Creator discovering his *“calling.”* In fact, Steve gives this advice to everyone who has finished their secondary school:

“I think you should go get a job as a busboy or something until you find something you are really passionate about. I’m convinced that about half of what separates the successful entrepreneurs from the non-successful ones is pure PERSEVERANCE. It is so hard. You put so much of your life into this thing. There are such rough moments in time that I think most people give up. Unless you have a lot of passion about this, you’re not going to survive. You’re going to give up. So, you’ve got to have an idea, or a problem or a wrong that you want to make right that you are passionate about, otherwise you are not going to have the perseverance to stick it through. I think that’s half the battle right there.”

And he is right. You have got to find what you love and are passionate about first. This is an important part of what you need to do after SPM. Once you discover what you are passionate about, you will be energised to greatness.

As I read all the stories in this book, a clear pattern emerges. Just like me, many of these young Malaysians featured in this book had similar struggles after SPM. Like me, many did not know if they should study or not, where to study, what to study, what jobs to take on and what career choices to make. Thus, the end of SPM is an important landmark. It was important for Steve Jobs and it is important for you.

For many, it may be going off to Form 6 and STPM or A-Levels and then

deciding on your careers. For others they may be forced to decide earlier. Yet, we all struggle with this decision as we know not what excites us or what makes us passionate. Finding out what makes you tick and what energises you is the key to life after SPM.

And so, for those who are not sure, this book does not give answers but it does give you the confidence to know that there are no right answers or no right career paths to chase. All roads can somehow lead to greatness as long as you find your passion. This book has 101 roads that were taken by 101 great Malaysians after their SPM. As you read their stories, bear in mind that the road you choose is going to be a unique one that only you can take. So, these stories are there to give you confidence that whatever choices you make in life, you can still make the best of it and come out tops. Whatever the circumstances God has imparted in your life, you don't need to be a victim but can choose to look at the bright side and go on to greatness. I do hope this book inspires you to greatness. Wishing you all the best in your career!

Roshan Thiran
CEO of Leaderonomics

Leaderonomics is a social enterprise committed to transforming the nation, one person at a time. Roshan hosts a TV show titled “The Leaderonomics Show” and worked at GE and Johnson & Johnson prior to Leaderonomics and is passionate about growing and developing everyone into great leaders.

To contact Roshan, email: people@leaderonomics.com

Introduction

Robben Island, located eleven kilometers off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa, is recognized today as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO as a symbol of freedom and democracy over oppression and racism. But for over half a millennium, it was a colony of lepers, convicts and other social pariahs.

In the 1970s, political dissenters were sent to this prison for their opposition towards the apartheid in South Africa. During their internment, the prisoners, huddling together, began to exchange views on ways to unite Africa. Soon, these short, candid conversations turned into passionate discourses and, subsequently, into organized lectures. Risking the wrath of security guards, those who had clandestine access to the outside world smuggled books into the prison. Those who were literate taught the illiterate to read, and those who held professional knowledge – doctors, lawyers, academics and others, taught everyone else about their respective fields of knowledge. Slowly but surely, they turned a torture chamber into a makeshift university. After decades of imprisonment, they were released as men more educated than they had been when they first entered prison. One of them emerged not only with increased knowledge but also a comprehensive plan to reconcile and lead a divided nation. His name is Nelson Mandela, and the rest is history.

The above story, we believe, captures the message of this book: that those who take their schooling into their own hands stand to make the most out of it, that the people and communities around us often form the best resources for learning, and that the opportunity for education exists wherever you will it to be.

As you go through the pages of this book, you will find a plethora of education routes, be it local or foreign education, multiple gap years or continuous degrees, the pursuit of more orthodox pathways or the blazing of new trails. Nevertheless, it does not serve as a guidebook on the default or ideal education route. Rather, the one hundred and one stories presented here

merely serve to highlight the fact that, contrary to stereotypical Malaysian views on education, the types of learning pathways are as diverse as the human potential and talents that harness them. As such, we also hope that this book will help to enlighten the public on the unique rewards of less visible career routes and alternative education.

We decided to entitle this book “What’s After SPM” in light of the fact that the end of the SPM examinations often remains the most decisive point in the lives of most young Malaysians today. However, we hope that this book will also appeal to non-SPM candidates and those who have chosen routes outside the Malaysian secondary school education system.

We hope that you too will discover the learning pathway that is best suited for yourself, make the best out of whatever resources you may have, take great joy in the pathway that you have chosen, and create your own opportunities to realize your dreams. Let us never forget that education is what you make of it.

The “Project What’s After SPM” Team Leaders



Regrets and Retributions

Adeliyn Lim Li Hui, 22, has oscillated between Kuantan, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur, and is currently studying Anthropology and Sociology in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her philosophy in life is, “Life is a bed of roses, thorns included”.

Being the youngest of three siblings, I hate my position in my family because my elder siblings usually blame their wrongdoings on me. If I get angry for ‘minor’ reasons, I am tagged “immature and emotional”. I am also compared to my siblings in every aspect. You must be wondering why I ramble on about my family, when this should be about what is after SPM.

Well, they are actually partly why I am currently pursuing Anthropology and Sociology. What really drove me to study those fields was to discover how we are shaped by the people around us. Anthropology is a study of the culture, belief and practices of living people, with the goal of providing a holistic account of human beings and human nature itself. Sociology, on the other hand, is a study and analysis of human social structure and activity, with the goal of achieving social well-being for all mankind. In simpler terms, Anthropology studies the individual and his direct influencers, whereas Sociology studies the society as a whole.

Some of the first anthropologists and sociologists, such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Margaret Mead, also inspired me with their passion to understand the many emerging new cultures unveiled through exploration, as well as their

attempts to educate their people and bring change to their societies.

However, the road leading to my current position was not a smooth one. After SPM, I wanted to enrol in a private college, since I already knew what I wanted to study. Unfortunately, I was talked into doing Form Six, and it was a decision that I have come to regret.

Form Six was torturous. I was persuaded into taking Accounting and Business instead of Literature, which I preferred. After that, I lost the zeal to study. During that time, I was also applying to several colleges in America. Thus, I had to take my SAT and TOEFL exams at the same time as the STPM examinations. Since my STPM results were satisfactory, I gained entry into Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

This time around, however, I did not ask for my family's opinion as I filled up the UPU form, lest they interfere with my decision again, for I knew that I was easily influenced. That is how I ended up pursuing my current course, instead of something 'sensible' like Economics.

Like most courses, Anthropology and Sociology are not easy. There are tons of books to read, as there are many philosophies and theories that one needs to understand and apply in different situations, and many new terms to learn. After all, they can be considered the mother of all social sciences. There are five branches in Anthropology alone: biological, cultural, linguistic, social, and archaeology. Sociology, on the other hand, has a far wider scope, ranging from the Sociology of Culture to the Sociology of Economics. It is all very intellectually stimulating – you will learn why it is important to look at things from another person's perspective, thus widening your worldview. You become more philosophical in every way.

Personally, I am drawn to the Sociology of Deviance, simply because everyone has been involved in an act of deviance at least once. Another concept in this aspect of sociology is that crime is a deviant behaviour – however, not all deviant behaviour is a criminal act. This is because an act of deviance is an act against societal norms, whereas a criminal act has been defined as prosecutable by the law. For example, transsexuals are perceived as deviants by society, but the law does not state that they can be prosecuted by law.

Those considering this course often ask the following question – what is the job market for this? Rest assured that job prospects are numerous – as long as there are human beings, you will be in demand. Beyond that, however, people should pursue either anthropology or sociology to widen their worldview, which helps them to gradually change their environment. Malaysia needs people who have more than just a basic knowledge of self and society so that we will not remain stuck in the same mentalities and social conditions. As for me, I aim to be a journalist in urban anthropology and/or an NGO volunteer working on national and public policies for the betterment of Malaysian society.

At the end of the day, no matter what course you take, it is your passion that will drive you on. A degree is just a worthless piece of paper if you do not enjoy your education, so pick your choice of education well.

I wish you all the best in education and in life.

*A degree is just a worthless piece of paper
if you do not enjoy your education.*



Hope Prevails

Adila Khairul Anuar, 21, is a bibliophilic aspiring writer who currently studies Computer Engineering in the University of Malaya (UM) under a PSD scholarship. Besides wanting to spend her days in happy idleness, she aims to get a PhD and live in at least three other major capital cities around the world.

In this book we will read of achievers, prodigies, hard workers and the average person. I am that average one!

The question of questions within this book: What happened to him or her? The people who remember me from high school would ask: what happened to that girl who always slept in class? The girl who dreamt a lot and read storybooks under her desk? The girl who used to hang out with so and so? Was she not in the choir?

The simplest answer would be: Nothing much.

During my teenage years, like any typical city girl, I wanted to be more. I wanted to study at Yale or Oxford. I was going to be someone brilliant. But at the time, SPM was miles away and I was content with just being the quiet girl who read books. Idleness became a habit as I thought the future could always be determined later. It did not help that I liked a lot of things. At that time, nothing seemed disagreeable.

Above all, I wanted to be able to read all day, for I thought (and still think)

that books were beautiful. Thus, I knew that my heart's deepest desire was to do English. However, I had to consider parental advice. They wanted the best for me and desired that I become a doctor or something that would pay well. Since I liked physics and science, I thought I would at least make an effort for their sake.

Time flew by and when SPM arrived, I became frantic. I had not pushed myself hard enough and was not ready for the challenge ahead. Hence, I received mediocre results and before I realised it, the time had come to apply to colleges.

Life at that time was depressing. My family earned a moderate income and there was no possible way I could go overseas without a scholarship. Since I was under-qualified, it seemed that every scholarship was out of reach by default. I also did not have co-curricular achievements like 'Head Prefect', 'National Athlete', or the 'Smartest Kid in the World' to add to my name. I only had my dreams, and even those seemed to be crumbling before my very eyes. I did try my best, but by then it was already too late. Perhaps I had not tried hard enough.

The best option I had then was to get into the Foundation programme in University Malaya. And so I did – after all, you reap what you sow. I slowly began to accept where I was and the path I had taken, although I still watched enviously as my friends flew off, one by one, to other countries and other adventures that I could only dream of.

Nevertheless, there is still hope within me. I know that if I just work hard enough, I will be able to succeed as well. The lesson here is to know what you want at an early stage and work at it. On a side note, the experience garnered from studying locally is definitely different from what you would get overseas.

There are some wonderful things here that you will never get elsewhere, like good Malaysian food, a trip back home every weekend, or even the warm sunshine. Ultimately, it does not matter where you are. Your potential to be

great is and always will be there. Success does not come easy and there is no use waiting until the last moment only to end up with regrets.

For my short tale does not end here – indeed, it has only just begun.

*Success does not come easy and there is
no use waiting until the last moment
only to end up with regrets.*

NOT FOR SALE



ASEAN Adventure

Aidan Chan Tiong Eyong, 21, reads Mathematics at Cambridge University under a Yayasan Khazanah scholarship. He studied for the Singapore-Cambridge A-levels examinations at National Junior College, Singapore, under the ASEAN scholarship.

My post-SPM story has its preamble in April 2006, the year I sat for my SPM examination. I was schooled in Lodge School, an English-medium private institution in Kuching, and I knew about the bond-free ASEAN scholarship because my cousin had successfully applied for it the previous year. So I submitted my application and made it through the English, Mathematics, and General Ability entrance tests, as well as an interview. I advise applicants to read widely and improve their English comprehension skills, and to obtain some exposure to problem-solving mathematics in order to prepare for the tests.

Singapore reputedly has the second-toughest A-levels examinations system in the world. General Paper is a compulsory subject, analogous to *Pengajian Am* in our STPM system, and you generally take four other core subjects. Many other students go on to take another unit, which is an advanced module in a subject of your interest. Six subjects at A-levels can be challenging in terms of timetabling and workload, so you should only take an advanced module if it interests you.

Initially, everyone will be caught up in the 'rat race' – tempted to fill their

portfolio with all manner of achievements, co-curricular activities (CCAs), and medals – but I advise the prospective ASEAN scholar not to do so. Only do things that are meaningful to you, and try to be better than yourself instead of comparing yourself to others. I should mention that the General Paper requires you to be well-read on current issues such as global politics, economics, science and technology, and the environment. *The Economist* and *The Guardian* are good publications to peruse.

In Singapore's junior colleges, CCAs are a serious business. I was the President of the Mathematics Society in my college and a member of the Strategic Games and Malay Dance societies. You should choose a combination of co-curricular activities that reflect your passions, challenge your personality, and allow you enough time for studies. In my case, I liked mathematics and chess, but also gave Malay Dance a go as I had never taken part in a dance CCA. We performed contemporary dances based on *silat*, the Malay martial arts system, at many high-profile Singaporean events and competitions. The Mathematics Society allowed me to organise weekly recreational math activities, such as cast puzzles and tangrams.

Being a math and problem-solving enthusiast, I also participated actively in math competitions, the main ones being the Singapore Mathematical Olympiads, the American Mathematics Contest, and the Australian Mathematics Competition. The Singapore scene is full of academic competitions you can participate in, and these are not limited to the sciences. There are economics and English-essay writing competitions on a national scale as well. The vibrancy of extracurricular academic competitions emphasising critical thinking and problem-solving is something not widely found in Malaysia. There is even a culture of organised Olympiad discussions, and I was an active participant in mathematical problem-solving discussions. In the end, these discussions are more important than the paper certificate or medal you earn from doing well in the competition.

Singapore is a repository of talent because its government offers scholarships to students from all over Asia, and you get some immensely talented students and occasional geniuses. I have two schoolmates headed to MIT and Harvard

respectively. Debating and discussing with great contemporaries is the high road to intellectual stimulation and progressive thinking.

Of course, studying in Singapore was tough. CCAs inclusive, I averaged 11 hours a day at college, and spent 14 hours at college on some days. Time is scarce; I recall eating my breakfast (pastry and Milo from a plastic cup) while walking to school on several occasions. There are frequent tests and assignments. Juggling so many responsibilities can be unwieldy initially, but one adjusts with time. You will build flexibility and resilience as you pass through this system.

You will also experience additional dimensions through community involvement programmes, leadership camps, road runs, and an Enrichment Week full of activities like investment seminars, cooking demonstrations, and food-tasting 'trails' through Singapore, designed to complement your education in as many ways as possible. It is a manifestation of the belief that the path to a holistic mind is diverse stimulation. There is indeed something for everyone in the ASEAN scholarship.

I believe I learnt a lot more during my two years in Singapore than in the previous five years of secondary school. If you are up for a challenge, go for the ASEAN scholarship! Be process-oriented as much as you are results-oriented, and you will find it enriching.

*Only do things that are meaningful to you,
and try to be better than yourself instead of
comparing yourself to others.*



Believing in the Impossible Dream

Aik Wei Shen, 24, attended SMJK San Min, Teluk Intan and went on to do Form Six (STPM) at SMK Horley Methodist, Teluk Intan. In 2006, he obtained a scholarship from the Cambridge Commonwealth Trusts to study Natural Sciences at Cambridge University, specialising in Biochemistry.

Breathing in the damp, hot air of Teluk Intan, I realised that I am still here in my hometown. The voice of my teacher rang distantly in my ears and I felt suffocated, for I still found it hard to accept that I was in a Sixth Form classroom. The new school was definitely not my first choice – with my good SPM results, I thought I would obtain a scholarship to study a Pre-U programme before going overseas for a medical degree. Although many told me that obtaining straight A1's in SPM was almost a guarantee for a scholarship from the Public Service Department (PSD), reality proved otherwise.

My naïveté made me suffer from much disappointment. More than once, I actually asked myself, “Why am I here?” Yet, the fighting spirit in me remained. I still desired to pursue a medical degree, preferably in the UK. I refused to accept that it was impossible for me to achieve my dream without a government scholarship. Perhaps it was also naïveté that kept me going, but I prefer to call it perseverance.

An appeal to PSD soon returned with some good news: I was offered a scholarship to study medicine in Indonesia. However, I received the news

with mixed feelings. Life can be frustrating when you do not get what you desire. It can be equally, if not more frustrating, to be given half of what you desire. As an idealist, I would rather take the risk of going through Form Six and applying to UK universities privately. It was indeed a risky choice as cautioned by many, but I was really adamant about my dream.

I believed that there would be another way to obtain some form of funding to study medicine in the UK. The biggest step towards realising your dream is convincing yourself that it is possible, and believing in it even when others around you do not. There was plenty of loneliness in the process of breaking free from the norm: exploring the option of foreign universities seemed too far-fetched, primarily due to the exorbitant fees. Unfazed, I was extremely determined to secure a place and a scholarship to study in the UK, for never had I wanted something so badly in my life.

At the end of Lower Six, I was presented with a new alternative for tertiary education, the Ivy Leagues. The SAT tests helped me discover just how fascinating and academically broad an American education could be. I was intrigued by how much there was to learn about certain disciplines which the Malaysian system made difficult to explore: the American education gives room for students to discuss and challenge conventions. It was at this time that I realised there was so much out there to explore apart from medicine. I attempted a series of tests, wrote essays, and gathered recommendations for applications to both the US and UK universities. This occupied my entire life in Upper Six. I remember telling my father that it all seemed impossible to handle, but assured him I would make it happen.

After going through the tedious and daunting application processes, I received an offer from Cambridge University to study Natural Sciences, and another offer from Cornell University. They were my top two choices, but the major stumbling block now was financing my studies. A series of funding and scholarship hunts were unsuccessful, with various scholarship providers rejecting me. Eventually, I had to give up my dream of studying in the US or the UK. I decided to attend the National University of Singapore (NUS) and turned down the offer from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) for medicine.

During orientation in NUS, I received a phone call from home informing me that the Cambridge Commonwealth Trusts (CCT) was offering me a scholarship that would cover my tuition and college fees at Cambridge. I remember filling the CCT form given to me by Queen's College after the conditional offer. That phone call marked my dream come true. Life is really indefinite, with no exact formula or route to success. Obtaining straight A1's for SPM does not guarantee a scholarship; but happily, neither does failing to get the PSD scholarship after SPM mark the end of your dreams.

*The biggest step towards realising your dream
is convincing yourself that it is possible, and
believing in it even when others around you do not.*



Just Do What You Like Best

Ainur Fuad, 28, is an adventure-lover who studied Actuarial Science and Finance at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA. After years of putting up with Actuarial Science for the promise of great wealth, she finally left the profession to pursue a simple career doing what she loves best: writing.

Had you asked me ten years ago what I wanted to be when I grew up, my answer would have been simple. Not because I have always known it, but because I did not. All I knew was that I wanted to be successful, and back then, that meant having a lot of wealth and power.

Growing up, I prayed everyday for a successful life. I worked very hard in school and daydreamt of success when I had nothing better to do. I saw my smartly dressed-self negotiating important deals with influential hotshots in my beautiful office with its spectacular view, but I never really knew what my job was in those dreams.

Thus, I found myself in a dilemma when SPM ended. I had absolutely no idea what to do next. It would have been an easy decision if overseas scholarships were offered for Accountancy programmes, but the only Accountancy scholarships back then were for local universities. Although I loved Accountancy and excelled at it in school, I ignored that option as I really wanted to go abroad.

One day, my uncle talked to me about Actuarial Science. It sounded very appealing – challenging course, big income, and excellent job prospects due to

the small number of professionals available. I was unsure about what the job scope actually entailed, but it seemed to involve a lot of math for insurance, and I had always been good with numbers. So, during my interview with the sponsors, I firmly stated my choice: I wanted to do Actuarial Science in the United States.

When the interview results were announced, I was ecstatic. I was accepted!

My first year in university went very well. Problems only surfaced when classes specialised into the Actuarial syllabus. I excelled in General Education and Risk Management classes, but did rather poorly in Statistics as I had very little interest in the subject. Thus, my average grade suffered.

I later graduated with a grade I was not really proud of, but openly accepted, because I knew I did not work as hard as I should have. I am a naturally hardworking person who loves learning, with my enthusiasm for education reflected in my good grades in other subjects. I disliked Actuarial Science but stuck to it because of my sponsorship – I was afraid they would withdraw it if I told them I had changed my mind.

After graduation, I got hired as an Actuarial Associate in a multi-national insurance company even before I returned to Malaysia. As aforementioned, actuaries are very high in demand due to their low numbers. Although I hated Actuarial Science in college, I took the offer anyway, hoping I would feel differently once I made a career out of it.

Unfortunately, it never did. I cringed when I compiled statistical data and whined every time I had to read an article related to the Actuarial field. It was plain torture! The only thing that kept me going was the wonderful people I worked with, whom I admired for their talent and passion for Actuarial Science.

After a year in the Actuarial Department, I happily transferred to another department in the insurance firm. I was doing rather well and would have had a promising future if I had stayed. However, I quit a year later, partly to help my father run his business, and also because I did not want to be doing insurance all my life.

However, there is nothing wrong with majoring in Actuarial Science or working for the insurance industry. Based on my experience, I can assure

you that Actuarial Science is a valuable and respected major, and insurance is a profitable and fast growing sector. The issue was that I disliked both fields, but endured them simply because I was too afraid to discuss my problems. I should have consulted my sponsors the minute I had a change of heart.

I also made the mistake of narrowing my ambitions to well-paid professions, which limited my career choices. I could have become a chef, a historian, a film-maker, an archaeologist – there are so many things you can do!

But above all, just do what you like best. Pursue a career relevant to your interests, and your passion will help you excel. The respect and fat pay cheques will come eventually when people start appreciating your talent.

Sometimes, I wonder how it would have been if I had stayed behind and pursued Accountancy instead. Yet, my experience studying abroad was so valuable that I would not have traded it for the world. Thus, I would like to believe that everything happens for a reason, and that no matter what happens in life, it is never too late to start again.

*Pursue a career relevant to your interests,
and your passion will help you excel.*



Glorious Pinnacle, Muddy Bottom, and the Ride Up

Aizuddin Arshad, 24, is pursuing a University of South Australia degree programme. A natural jack-of-all-trades, he likes to learn and experience a little bit of everything. Most intrigued with socio-political issues and current affairs, he aspires for a lucrative writing career.

People say that it is not the years in your life that matter, but the life in the years. That is exactly what I decided my life should be after SPM; a life lived.

Back in school, I did a number of things – one too many, some might suggest – that ranged from being the disciplinarian head-boy to a dramatic thespian. In hindsight, it was not really surprising that I made the aforementioned decision. The outcomes of my two earlier major examinations, UPSR and PMR, were promising cause for hope. On the other hand, although my SPM results were sufficiently praiseworthy, they were not a crowning success. Nonetheless, they were good enough for me to pursue tertiary education at UiTM, Shah Alam.

Prior to registering as a university student, I was sternly warned by my parents to steer off the active path I undertook in school. They shuddered at the thought of me ending up with yet another disappointing end result. Having failed to meet their expectations, the guilt had me half-heartedly nodding in agreement.

For a rather long while, I kept that promise. I subjected myself to monotony, and my days were a mindless routine. I woke up, got ready for class, headed to the faculty, returned to the dorm (with the occasional pit-stop to the library), and that was it. The cycle was then repeated over hundreds of days. At least, until an opportunity came knocking that changed my life entirely. Some would say for the better – others, for the worse.

Long story short, I became involved in the student council. On this platform, I got to experience many different things, meet all kinds of people from all strata of society, and most importantly, make a difference. I was able to help the victims of several natural disasters that had devastated this country and spent time in various *kampungs*. In addition, dealing with countless officials to fight for the rights of the student body imbued me with confidence. The fact that I got to learn managerial skills, event planning, proposal drafting, as well as see the world beyond our borders, was an added bonus to the whole experience.

However, the whole journey was being made on a broken promise to my parents. Divine retribution was signed, sealed, and delivered. I was left in an academic rut and had no other choice but to look for greener pastures. Thankfully, it was not all doom and gloom, for there is a saying that goes, “When you have hit rock bottom, there is no other way but up.”

It is safe to say that I am currently on my journey up, and it has been a laborious, but promising process thus far. I had to start from scratch and dig deeper to discover what fit me better. I had to go college-hunting at the age when I was supposed to already have a scroll in my possession. I had to weigh in the financial pros and cons.

In the end, I opted for a degree in Communications and Media Management. I cannot conclusively say that Communications is my calling, especially when I used to think that Law was my calling (and we all know how that went). This time around, I have learnt to settle for a learning experience. I would also like to believe that I have some raw and unpolished skills that this new course can help me to better develop for my future career.

On this wholly different path, I get to experience many other new things. In the last year alone, I was involved in two short films. Both experiences helped

me to develop my formerly aesthetically-challenged mind, and tapped into my more bohemian and artistic side. As for my studies, this course delves into the many fields of media, such as journalism, public relations, advertising, publishing, digital media, etc., which appeals to my jack-of-all-trades nature. Furthermore, I was granted the opportunity to present at an actual international conference sometime in 2009, which was truly an eye-opening introduction to the world of academia.

I must say, I love it so far – even if this new path did not have its fancy perks, meeting new people and amazing new friends is always a cherished prize. I have gone through the whole top-bottom wheel of life process, and if there is one thing I can take from that and share with the rest of the world, it is this – do what your heart desires. It may lead you to fame and success, but bear in mind that it could also lead to unfavourable circumstances. No matter the outcome, you can proudly say that you did it your way and that you lived.

*People say that it is not the years in your life
that matter, but the life in the years.
That is exactly what I decided my life
should be after SPM; a life lived.*



Finding my Foodie

Alia Ali, 25, believes that a love of learning is the most important and powerful passion that everyone should cultivate. She spends her time cuddling cats, practising Spanish, and playing in several KL-based bands. She knows she can do anything, for according to her hero Martin Yan, “If Yan can cook, so can you!”

“You’ve got the job,” says Boss #1, reaching out to shake my hand.

My inner glee is momentarily interrupted by Boss #2 leaning over and whispering conspiratorially, “You should feel lucky. He doesn’t hire just anyone. This means you’ve got *it*. Not everyone gets it.”

(In order to explain what “it” is, let us rewind to the beginning of the year.)

It was a dark and stormy night – well, not really, but Kampung Baru did look more daunting in the light rain. My mother and I were huddling under an umbrella outside the mosque, waiting for a man in an orange cap to show up. Soon enough, we see a dark figure shuffling up and stepping into the light of the street lamp with a wide grin.

“Hi, I’m [Boss #1] from FriedChillies! You’re here for the Kampung Baru food crawl?”

I nodded fervently. FriedChillies is a food media company based in Petaling Jaya, and they eat, cook, write, and photograph anything to do with food. I knew I would get along with them from the start. Soon enough, a

motley crew of people arrived, all hungry for a night of feasting. We were all raring to go, and bounced around from place to place, tasting *tempoyak* and *rendang itik* in one, relishing *nasi kerabu* and *nasi dagang* in another. Most would have admitted defeat after the first stop, but I still had a spring in my step after the last restaurant. My dinner companions looked at me in amazement.

“I should probably intern for you guys at some point,” I commented, laughing at their reactions. Boss #2 looked at me thoughtfully. “Contact us during your holidays then. We need more foodies like you.” (Fast forward to the present.)

“You’re a foodie,” Boss #2 continues, “We get all sorts applying to work here, and to be honest, everyone loves food. But like I said, not everyone gets it. Gets us.”

Grinning, I looked around the lounge. We were sitting on a comfortable couch, facing a widescreen television with DVD box sets of cooking shows and food-themed movies stacked up next to it. Shelves filled with food-related books and magazines lined the walls.

“You’ll be writing, mostly. Restaurant and cookbook reviews, recipe testing, and research,” I hear Boss #2 say.

Then I walked into the main office.

“As you can see, half of our kitchen is an office,” Boss #1 says, only partly in jest.

My jaw dropped, my eyes widened, and my heart beat a little quicker. Half of the office *is* a kitchen. I try not to squeal in excitement. The rest of the meeting passed in a blur of salary negotiations and working hours, and I walked out feeling like I just landed the best job in the universe – which I did.

What the heck, I thought. I squealed.

To be a foodie, you have to love both eating and exploring food as a subject – where it comes from, how it grows, how ingredients react with heat and each other. You explore different tastes and push the boundaries of your own culinary limits, whether cooking or dining. You talk about food when you are eating. You even watch cooking shows while you eat!

I am all of that, and more. Growing up, my mother would make me sit

in the kitchen with her. As I was too young to handle real knives, I would use a butter knife to peel garlic. Occasionally, I could sit on the counter and stir the pot on the stove, which is a real treat when you are less than four feet tall. I understand the powerful comfort that food provides at the end of a harsh day, like humble *nasi goreng* made only the way a mother can. I have made people hungry with stories of made-from-scratch lasagna at 2 a.m. Staring at the cheese section of the gourmet grocers has moved me to tears.

Why, then, did it take me so long to figure out what I wanted to do with my life? Being a cook did cross my mind, but my bad knees halted that dream pretty quickly. I think I wanted to prove something to everyone around me, that I was capable of a more ‘professional’ career. Three colleges and two major life plan shifts led me to study journalism in the university I am currently in, and even now I do not know if this is right – what I do know is that I loved food through it all, and I no longer try to prove anything to anyone but myself.

So above all, pinpoint your passion and pursue it. What they say is true: if you love your job, you do not have to work a day in your life. From stumbling through the streets of Kampung Baru, to writing this while researching moon-cakes, I have savoured every step of this fantastic journey, and I cannot wait to find out what we are cooking when I go in to work later.

*If you love your job,
you do not have to work a day in your life.*



Tales of a Homeschooler

Amelia Lee Zhi Yi, 20, is a freshman of Bryn Mawr. Although her intended major is geology/environmental science, she remains unsure. She sometimes fancies herself a beauty queen who enjoys reading, riding on her royal pony, and taking long walks by the beach. And seriously, all she ever wanted was world peace.

Instead of choosing the conventional route upon completing primary school at 11, I enrolled into a different programme for my secondary education. You see, I was homeschooled at a centre for homeschooling.

More often than not, people have stereotypes of homeschoolers and find it hard to grasp the idea of studying without a teacher. Truth be told, I am not an overachieving nerdy genius with no life. I am just like you. I have regular schooling hours, I visit the *mamak* obsessively, and breathe with two nostrils – you get the point.

The only difference was that I wielded more control over my education, for the beauty of homeschooling lies in its flexibility. I could study at home or at the homeschool centre – even underneath Patrick Starfish's rock if I wanted – as long as I complete my work and exams in a timely manner. Being homeschooled granted me a lot of freedom, not only in terms of time, but also in terms of the rate of my academic advancement.

When I started, homeschooling was still in its infancy in Malaysia; the centre had only 13 pioneer students. Mornings would begin with planning in

our goal books, after which work started in our cubicles. Books were sectioned and self-explanatory, and there would be a test after each section to ensure mastery of the topic. Upon completion of the book, the supervisor would administer an overall exam. If we did not pass, the whole book would have to be redone.

As there is no time limit for us to complete a book, proper time-management skills, goal planning, and accountability to one's self is important – those are characteristics that I can proudly attribute to being homeschooled. Granted, challenges abounded for both administrators and students because it was a wholly new concept, but with the guidance of my dedicated principal and a few awesome supervisors, I managed to overcome the transition from a Chinese primary school to homeschool and completed Grade 12 in one piece.

Upon graduating from homeschool and completing my SATs in November 2007, I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do, except to study in the United States. I was obscenely unprepared, and missed the 07-08 applications as a result. I took it as a temporary setback and enrolled myself into a local college for their A-levels programme in January. The plan was to have a taste of what it is like interacting with a large group of peers for six months.

While there, I also met wonderful lecturers who were ever-ready to offer their help and suggestions even after I left the college. Although I did not complete the programme, college was one of my most unforgettable experiences; I would do it all over again, given the chance. In the second half of 2008, I studied at home for my SAT2s and ACT; during which I also began my search for colleges and prepared drafts for college application essays. Some lesser-known sites I found particularly useful were Unigo and College Prowler.

Come results day on April 1 2009, I was devastated. Of the eight schools that I applied to, I received four rejections. The silver lining was that three schools – among them my dream school – waitlisted me. With encouragement and help from friends and family, I pursued all three waitlists by sending in letters reiterating my interest and provided an art portfolio. Initially, I was too shy to send in the latter because I thought I was not good enough to compete with 'normal' students, i.e. those that were not homeschooled.

Happily, on May 15 2009, a school admitted me and offered me a 95 per cent scholarship! Although I still have not heard from the other two waitlisted schools, I am comforted by the fact that my dreams of studying abroad have finally come true, for I am now attending a Pennsylvanian women's liberal arts college. Its name literally translates to 'large hill' in Welsh, we have the best-ranked college food in the US, and dorms that 'feel like palaces'. Oh, did I mention laundry is free?

There are so many people I would like to thank for aiding me, directly and indirectly, in my quest to fulfill my dream. Listing them down would undoubtedly take up more pages than this book and bring the cost of printing through the roof. Although their names were not mentioned in the essay, they will forever hold a place in my heart. *Hutang emas dapat dibayar, hutang budi dibawa mati.*

The only difference was that I wielded more control over my education, for the beauty of homeschooling lies in its flexibility.



The Accidental Entrepreneur

Anand Pillai, 27, studied Engineering, wrangled a job as a management consultant, and went on to become a manager in the corporate sector. He soon left the cubicle world to venture out into the socially-conscious entrepreneurial sector, where today he tries to contribute positively to the communities he works in while making a living.

Looking back at the last nine years, here are the hard facts I have had to face:

1. Before SPM, I was too lazy to study hard as I knew I had the financial backing of my parents. I never thought about how lucky I was, or how much they sacrificed to put me through college.
2. I finished SPM with dreams of being a hotshot engineer in Silicon Valley riding the dot-com bubble. Of course, I knew shockingly little about what any of those things really entailed.
3. Up till recently, my knowledge of the world – its problems, its people, and its culture – was severely lacking as it was shaped by commercialised Western television and the Internet. Although I grew up in Malaysia, I had little exposure to folk from other social classes.

My journey began at the dawn of the millennium when I completed my A-levels and went on to pursue an engineering degree at Northwestern University in Chicago (it was very, very cold there – minus 20 degrees Celsius at times).

Three years after starting college, I was a radically changed person. I

realised that my true calling was to devote my life to work that was meaningful to me, and that I did not enjoy engineering in its traditional sense, although I graduated with a degree in Industrial Engineering and Management Sciences.

Upon graduation, I was determined to find employment in the non-profit sector and secured an internship at an organisation that provided food to the homeless in Chicago. Although I enjoyed my work immensely, I was not able to remain employed there due to my US work-visa situation. I had to decide if I was to return to Asia to work in the development/non-profit field, or pursue a corporate career in the US, which was the only way to secure a work-visa at the time.

The allure of a large pay cheque, sharp grey suits, and expense accounts eventually won me over and I accepted a management consulting position in Philadelphia. I worked there for two years and went on to become a manager at a global pharmaceutical company in Princeton, New Jersey, making more money than I ever thought possible. Fortunately, throughout my corporate career, I focused on learning from my work environment and saving as much money as I could while pursuing other interests after work hours.

After three years in my cubicle, I left the corporate world and began to work on my own entrepreneurial ventures in Philadelphia and other cities. I wanted to be a small business entrepreneur because it would allow me to live a lifestyle that I cherished. More importantly, I would be able to pursue work that would be meaningful to me – personally and professionally – without being held accountable to someone else's whims or the profit motives of owners or investors.

Over the years I discovered (due to a combination of part-time work and meeting new people) that my passion lay in 'social business' – i.e. the model of running profitable, successful companies which at its core takes into account the 3 P's – People, Planet, and Profits. This effectively combined my interests in the traditional business world with providing a social benefit to the communities I worked in.

My entrepreneurial ventures include partnering with an experienced real estate investor on low-income housing in Philadelphia. I also developed

an education consulting business where I worked as a career counselor for 20-somethings who were trying to find their place in the world. Most importantly, both endeavours were entrepreneurial in nature and very meaningful to me as they met the objectives I wanted to achieve in my professional career.

After spending close to ten years in the States pursuing further education and work opportunities, I recently decided to move back to Asia. Spending time with my family, pursuing meaningful business ventures in Malaysia, and exploring and enjoying my native land was a calling too strong to ignore. I intend to continue my work in real estate and career guidance here, but also focus my energies on other business ventures including sustainable tourism, fitness, and nutrition – all passions of mine.

As I pause midway through my life and look back at life after SPM, I realise that the road I took was one that I never expected to be on, but I am eternally grateful and humbled by the opportunities I have had. I intend to live the rest of my life building upon that foundation.

I constantly remind myself of my primary goal – creating positive change in the world. All great journeys start with small steps, and I hope anew everyday to have the courage to take them.

*All great journeys start with small steps, and I hope
anew everyday to have the courage to take them.*



Homage

*Andrew Loh, 22, is studying Political Science and Islamic Studies
in Swarthmore College, USA.*

I am not a natural public speaker.

I remember distinctly: in Form Two, I was so shy that I refused to order food from hawker stalls. Instead, I made my mother do it.

Yet, as a debater, I would win two national debating championships with SMK Damansara Jaya (SMKDJ).

Under Ms. Magdalen Su Ai Tiing's guidance, I was transformed from a skittish, stuttering student into a confident, composed orator. My debate coach was a miracle worker. Unflinchingly, she sacrificed her personal time to stay back with the team – our afternoons were spent writing scripts, constructing arguments, and rehearsing speeches in musty classrooms. We were inducted into the selective club that is Malaysian high school debate and introduced to the esoteric language of the art: the poise, the charm, and the eloquence by which one could win jousts, rouse spirits, and tantalise audiences. Ms. Magdalen was the determining factor for SMKDJ's triumph in the 2003 Wira Cup.

To me, however, that is not Ms. Magdalen's greatest accomplishment. The greatest teachers know that the most impactful thing they can ever do is not to merely teach well, but to inspire, provoke, and incite ordinary people into doing extraordinary things.

It was for Ms. Magdalen that I went back to SMKDJ to coach after SPM, to give back to my alma mater for all it has given me.

Now, going back to school to coach is uncommon, by all means – most of us are full-time students, with our time and energy harnessed by academia until we graduate from university. I was, however, in a delicate situation. Firstly, in July 2005, I had just returned from a fully-sponsored six-month student exchange program to the US under AFS Malaysia's Youth Exchange and Study Programme. Secondly, I was determined to go to university in America, where intakes are in August, without any pre-university qualification. Hence, I had a gap year-and-a-half of non-study after SPM. My impetus for coaching could therefore be realised in this unstructured milieu.

Thus, I became a coach for two SMKDJ debate teams. This time around, it was I who forced my debaters to maintain eye contact, write succinctly, and throw their voices; it was I who enforced discipline and dictated deadlines. The reversal of roles was jarring at first; I now held the power and responsibility to mould my students into speakers, just as Ms. Magdalen did to me.

Every debater knows that the most heart-wrenching portion of any debate is the aftermath, where your coach tells you what you did wrongly and how you should improve. These sessions are necessary; they are the coming of age, the puberty, the pimples, and the heartache of debate. As a speaker, there is no alternative to confronting one's mistakes and correcting them. The greatest of debaters are not only the most eloquent – they are the most bruised and resilient at heart. However, I was now in charge of inflicting pain.

It was then that I finally understood the pedagogue's paradox. On one hand, the blunter I was and the more honestly I exposed the weaknesses of my students, the faster they could improve. At the same time, I had to be careful to not demotivate them so much that they would give up and quit debating.

I learnt to teach.

Things were also much clearer on this side of the microphone. What was previously a jumble of concepts, thoughts, and assertions to myself as a debater now seemed to self-organise. As an outsider, I realised that I could identify arguments, formulate rebuttals, and demolish stands with much less effort.

I became a better debater.

Furthermore, I was working together with two other coaches. We disagreed on certain issues at times, but when we made a decision, we closed ranks and stood by it. We enjoyed the sparring sessions with our debaters, dreaded the long hours of editing every script, and gave pep talks to rally our spirits before every performance. Most importantly, we celebrated when our blood, sweat, and tears paid off.

I discovered that I work best in teams.

For this is the beauty of service: one does not merely give back – one gains so much more from the experience. The benefits are mutual, tangible, and transformative. Service offered me an environment rich for introspection and understanding – from helping others, I learnt so much about myself by consciously marking my transition from awkward boy to assertive debater to altruistic coach.

And it has been worth it, for we achieved the impossible: both teams clinched their national titles, a first in SMKDJ history.

My achievements as a debate coach are but my homage to Ms. Magdalen and all debate coaches. And it is my humble hope that you will be inspired to do the same – to take the road less travelled by, for this will make all the difference.

*For this is the beauty of service:
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Against All Odds

Azlyn Balqis, 25, is guilty of always splurging on good food and cheap clothes. A Mass Communications graduate of KDU College, she currently writes (and reads!) the news for Hitz FM.

I never really had a dream.

Sure, everyone has their own childhood dream to pursue when they are all grown up. Unfortunately, things change and situations change, especially when you are 17 years old with your mediocre SPM results in hand.

I was neither brilliant nor hardworking enough to be in the Science stream, but I was also not really interested in the Home Economics stream. I ended up in the middle with Accounts, Additional Mathematics, and Economics – subjects I never really understood, and subjects I knew I probably would not end up pursuing.

My disinterest hit me hard, as my subpar results did not qualify me for a government scholarship, nor did they get me entry into any government university. All around me, my classmates were discussing plans of attending government universities. The richer ones were contemplating London, Australia, and the United States.

And then there was me – without an offer in hand, without anywhere I really wanted to go. To add salt to the wound, I did not even know what I wanted to pursue in the first place! But I was sure of one thing: I still wanted an education. I knew that having that piece of paper in my possession was vital

for my future.

I consulted friends, family, neighbours, lecturers, and eventually decided on Mass Communications. I loved meeting people, planning events, and anything pertaining to the media and entertainment industry. Blame the fame and glamour of it all – that got to me!

I Googled universities and colleges, but everything was insanely expensive without the help of doting parents or the procurement of scholarships. After more extensive researching, I narrowed it down to the then cheapest choice – KDU College – for my parents were not really well off, although we live comfortably and I am blessed to have enough to live my life with. However, a diploma in Mass Communications at KDU would have cost a whopping RM24, 000, not including books and miscellaneous fees.

I tried applying for government loans, time-consuming as they were. I filled tons of forms meticulously, but my attempts were futile as I am a Singaporean and could not qualify for a loan.

So I decided to take things into my own hands, and visited bank after bank to apply for my own student loan. But every bank told me the same thing – that I needed a guarantor. I had no choice left by then, and with a heavy heart, I asked my mother to help by being a guarantor. She turned me down, and even though it broke my heart back then, I now understand that she probably had her own reasons.

In the end, it was my father who came through for me. I know it was not easy for him back then as he was going through a divorce with his second wife, but he never hesitated to help fund my studies when I was left at a dead end.

With that, I finally enrolled as a KDU student under the Mass Communications faculty in August 2003. I still remember how much I hated asking my father for money every time semester fees were due. However, knowing that he was working hard to help me pay off my tuition fees only motivated me to work that much harder.

I graduated in 2006, on course. Some friends failed to pull through, but I did not have the luxury of failing. I literally could not afford to fail a single subject, as it was too expensive for both my father and I. Going up on stage

during graduation and receiving my diploma was by far one of the proudest moments in my life, especially since I did not fare so well during SPM.

That was three years ago, and I have held several jobs since I graduated. I have met celebrities, mingled with KL's crème de la crème, helped write scripts for top television shows, worked as an event coordinator at one of KL's hottest nightclubs, slaved in a public relations firm, and written press releases for some of Malaysia's top brands. Today, I write the news for Malaysia's top English radio stations, which goes live everyday. We bring the country the most important updates and news on Malaysia and the world.

I never knew I would get this far in my life, and it never once crossed my mind that I would have this amazing opportunity to do what I do because I was clueless as to where I would be after SPM. To be honest, I *still* do not know where I am going today, but what I do know is that life keeps on moving and the world keeps on spinning, and like them, I do not plan to stop anytime soon.

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Busking the Days Away

Azmyl Yunor, 33, is known as a singer-songwriter, musician, and a lecturer at a local private college in the Klang Valley. He performs regularly in the independent music circuit and also does academic research in the field of Communication and Cultural Studies.

One of the challenges of being a student overseas is finding a part-time job. Living abroad can be expensive, but you learn to be street-smart. One of the first things you learn about being independent is how to be resourceful in finding extra income and saving enough money without neglecting your studies.

Busking, or street-performing, is often overlooked as a good means of earning extra cash by students. I needed an income and all my attempts at finding conventional part-time jobs fell flat. I did, however, deliver newspapers in my final year and got chased by dogs in the process. The busking permit issued by the city of Perth, where I studied in university, cost only AU\$1 at the time, and I figured that I had nothing to lose as I was confident I could do better than some of the buskers I saw on the streets. It would also be a great opportunity for me to practise my craft, earn some money, and get to know my adopted city a little bit more.

During my maiden street performance in front of a jewellery shop, I only sang while banging a tambourine that I had bought a few minutes before at a music store discount bin. I suppose my performance did not impress the busy weekend crowd – I only earned AU\$0.60 and stopped after 15 minutes.

I came back the next day with my full gear of a beat-up acoustic guitar and harmonica, and was determined to make an impression with songs I made up along the way. Strumming the guitar and singing out loud in public without being judged by the passing crowd was extremely liberating, especially in comparison to performing at a venue where the audience's undivided attention is focused on the one performer onstage.

However, you need a hook, or 'shtick', something to impress the random passersby into parting with their spare change, and that is when you realise how much energy and effort is needed to be a busker. Busking is not begging; it is a craft. There were many other buskers, some of which were backpackers who merely strummed and sang, but they were not there to entertain or elicit curiosity. I could not resist fulfilling those two criteria, so I took it as a personal challenge to engage my audience. I was hardly a social person, so the mask of 'entertaining' felt empowering as buskers are generally left alone as long as they comply with the regulations.

Playing on the street also exposed me to all kinds of people and characters. It was a daunting experience, especially on busy weekends, but ultimately a rewarding one. I also noticed that none of the buskers were of Asian origin, so this fact made my act a curiosity by default. I was even approached by an old Sicilian man who offered me Godfather-style protection by casually stating a la Don Corleone, "If anybody comes and disturbs you, you tell me alright, mate?" Talk about connecting with your audience!

The more I performed, the more I began to see and experience in person the socio-economic gap that exists in any major city across the globe. I encountered a variety of curious passersby ranging from policemen, high school kids, and tourists to the homeless, bums, and social outcasts.

Some incidents on the street also showed me that generosity lurks in the places you least expect; several times, the homeless, and even some bums, offered me their spare change (which I felt they needed more than I did) after watching me perform. I politely refused, yet they insisted, and I felt overwhelmed by their actions. At the end of the day, after all the strumming and performing, the lesson I learnt most was humility.

My busking years had a huge influence on my future endeavours as a musician and as an educator. It was a priceless experience that I still look back upon with the fondest of memories. In fact, I went busking again last year when I visited Australia, and I lived off my earnings after I ran out of cash! You learn a lot about society and your surroundings through busking; above all, you are not only an entertainer, but also an observer amongst the stream of strangers. Busking offers the flexibility of when and where you want to work, as well as the opportunity to see both the kindness and the dark side in strangers. But you take it all in your stride – after all, it is part and parcel of the craft known as busking! So if all else fails, pick up your guitar, get a permit, and go sing your heart out!

Busking offers the flexibility of when and where you want to work, as well as the opportunity to see both the kindness and the dark side in strangers.



Life, etc.

Benjamin Ng, 25, graduated from the University of Cambridge in 2008. He is an avid traveller with a penchant for contemporary literature and classic films. He also fancies himself a penniless playwright.

The way I see it, you are either a man with a plan or a man without one. The man with a plan knows things; he knows where he is going to have dinner tonight, what he will be doing by this time next year, what his ultimate calling is. He knows if he is meant to run a company under an iron fist by age 30, or if he is going to be the sort of pop star you both love and loathe on national television. And then he executes his plan: he sacrifices the dispensable for his dreams, connects the necessary dots, and achieves his goal in half the time projected. He is unstoppable, a hurtling train with a destination to reach by 4 p.m. this afternoon.

Confession: I am a man without a plan.

After my SPM examinations, my dad approached me with a stack of magazines and a pencil, insisting that I sit with him to chart the course of my future. He had a list of colleges ready, with a selection of courses carefully circled for my convenience. We did that for about ten minutes before I realised that I was hungry; we went to get some doughnuts and the task was abandoned until the day I got offered a scholarship to study Law in England. We looked at each other before I finally shrugged: “I might as well take it up.”

To which he replied, "It's not like you had any other plans anyway."

At college, I spent long hours doing nothing except sit around at Starbucks in calculated attempts to exhibit teenage angst. It was not until my two best friends joined the Editorial Board of my college magazine that I did, and only because I had no other friends then. Placed in the marketing division, we had to plan magazines launches and hold Theme Days where we would give students the excuse to attend class with giant hats the shape of beer mugs. When my ridiculous ideas were mistaken for creativity, they promoted me to Chief Editor the following year, which finally gave me something substantial to put on my resumé and had me drunk with arguably non-existent power.

My *laissez-faire* streak continued well into my university years: I chose to study Social and Political Sciences in my first year solely because I did not see the point of doing three years of Law when I could get away with studying something far less intellectually rigorous. Admittedly, having to deal with Thomas Hobbes and Karl Marx nearly drove me insane. I spent the better half of the year receiving subpar marks and snide comments from my supervisors regarding my inability to digest "something quite as simple as Sigmund Freud." The only thing I learnt was the ability to randomly namedrop anyone I wanted during small chats, like the sociologist Emile Durkheim, even if he was not immediately relevant to the topic at hand. When I finally switched to Law the following year, I was filled with nothing but gratitude.

In my final year, graduation was particularly difficult to ignore, mostly because it carried suggestions of growing up and actual responsibilities. There were jobs to be sought and pressing decisions to be made, so I did none of those and instead went to Colombia, where I spent a year working with a charity that specialised in rehabilitating teenage prostitutes. It was not always fun, especially when brawls occurred in the area. I once got robbed on my way home from work, while a colleague of mine was punched by a transvestite and had to be hospitalised for two days. On better days, we would go to strip clubs and attempt to convince the minors we found there into seeking treatment with us. Once again, it was not what I had really signed up for, but it would be disingenuous to say that it was not worth my while.

I am not sure what comes after this; I imagine you would have more luck at the roulette wheel. That is what happens when you do not have a plan: you rely on a cocktail of good fortune and unexpected opportunities, and hope for the best. Sometimes you end up heading an entire team of writers and graphic designers; sometimes you find yourself at the mercy of an essay on the Federalist Papers. For what it is worth, you run with the hand you are dealt. The good almost always comes with the bad. You may find yourself in a country you had never have envisioned yourself living in, but then you cannot balk at the prospect of having to hold an icepack to the forehead of a bleeding prostitute. When you let Life run his course, you leave it to his veritable companion, Luck.

(I actually made that last quote up myself, but I think I am going to attribute it to the always estimable Emile Durkheim.)

*For what it is worth,
you run with the hand you are dealt.*



Growing and Knowing

Charis Loke, 20, is a former student of King George V Secondary School and Intec UiTM. She is not quite sure what she would like to learn next – juggling, perhaps? – but will probably find out at Brown University. Her hobbies include deploring Peter Jackson’s obscenely expensive film desecration of Tolkien’s work.

The Principal said: “The Malaysian school system teaches you to work. We teach you how to think.”

So began my adventure at the Australian International School Malaysia (AISM). I had been awarded a scholarship after SPM to study Year 11 and 12 there along with two others, and took it with the desire to explore a different education system and broaden my outlook, which I did.

Consider this: my taking Visual Arts (VA) as a subject was a no-no since it clashed with Physics, but I signed up for the VA extracurricular activities. Here there were – pardon my gushing – acrylics, Arches paper, and other materials I would only goggle at in art stores. Most importantly, there was an art teacher who willingly let me explore the room’s resources and invited me to VA classes when an artist came to speak. This magnanimity was something AISM deeply impressed upon me.

Euphoric painting aside, I was still a student, albeit one facing a gaping lack of funds for tertiary education. I was determined to do all I could to obtain a scholarship when I completed Year 12. On a whim, I contacted potential

overseas universities to see what they expected my UAI to be. 99.5, said Oxford. Was it possible? Well, we can work on it, said my homeroom teacher.

Still, my initial excitement gave way to misery. Life as a scholarship student in a school that my peers paid RM100, 000 a year to attend was not all rainbows and ponies, not least because I was not used to such an environment and reacted rather poorly to it. I had too many preconceptions, went in with too many expectations, and perhaps I took my responsibility as a scholar a little too seriously. I also remained unsure on how the convoluted UAI system works, but if I recall correctly: you are either first, or nothing. I could not continue in such a cut-throat environment for long – I was not the aggressively competitive excellent-grade-churning machine many made me out to be.

I applied for the Public Service Department (PSD)'s post-SPM overseas degree scholarship, and took it when they offered me, but not without regret. AISM was exceedingly kind to let me go without a bond, as they had with a previous scholar. One of my teachers thought that I would be better off elsewhere, given the circumstances, and I think he was right.

After six months at AISM, to INTEC I went with little expectations save a renewed determination to do well, since taxpayers were now funding me. It proved better than I could have imagined; the switch to the American Degree Foundation Programme (ADFP), a US-based system, enabled me to study without eating myself inside out with worry, as did the assurance of having my first degree funded, provided I maintained a reasonable level of academic excellence. 'First place' was no longer something necessary to strive for, or of any importance – one competed with one's self and one's self alone. Adjusting from AISM's relative openness to the conservative (rules-wise) environment of INTEC took time, but it was worth it. My Fall class was the best group of people I have ever shared a classroom with. I tempered studies with friendships, all-nighters with feats of foolery, and exams with long midnight conversations. And I continued to grow.

While contemplating university applications, I began to subject myself to much-needed introspection, and I decided that I wanted to go to Brown

University. Never had I felt such a connection to a university; certainly not when researching Oxford, UNSW, ANU, and Harvard only because I had heard of them, because people were convinced they were good and therefore the place for everyone to go. Never mind that most of the people I talked to had never heard of Brown, or that those who did knew it from *Gossip Girls* or the *OC*. Never mind that the goose bumps I got from trawling the university website were from the chilly night air and not from awe.

For now, I have apprehensions about university life, about whether the next four years will be akin to another AISM or INTEC – but I know why I want to go to Brown, and those reasons and all the ensuing responsibilities are mine alone. It is better, I think, to go into things knowingly, to be sure about the choices one makes, be it choosing a scholarship, school, hobby, or cause to further – if only because one is more likely to put one's heart and soul into it and come out happier for it.

It is imperative not to live out societal ideals or the vicarious longings of others. I am glad the people I know and the experiences I had impressed this on me, because I might just be very miserable now had I walked someone else's path.

*It is imperative not to live out societal ideals
or the vicarious longings of others.*



Silver Linings

Chen Wei Kiat, 22, studied for his Cambridge A-levels at Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, before pursuing his Bachelor's Degree in Engineering in Cornell University, USA. He grew up in three different countries, and had to consistently adapt to the ever-changing environments.

Back in secondary school, I had a very solid plan for the future. I served as the head prefect in Sri Kuala Lumpur, Subang Jaya where I took my SPM in 2005. I would then complete the A-levels before studying abroad in the UK. It started as planned when I took the Cambridge A-levels programme in Taylor's University.

Six months into the programme, university applications began. Like many others, I applied online through the University and College Application Services (UCAS) to continue my studies in the UK. Throughout the process, my friends convinced me to apply to the US as well. And so I did, regarding it as my back-up plan.

One year after SPM, I began to receive replies from the universities that I applied to – unfortunately, I did not make it to Cambridge University. Thus, I made Imperial College London (ICL) my first choice. More bad news ensued. Only two out of the seven universities that I applied to in the US accepted me, and they were not as good and well-known as ICL. As I sought advice from my parents and peers, I began wanting to go to the US more and

more. Discounting the fact that the offer from ICL was conditional, I felt that studying in the US would be a more enriching experience, and figured that I would have a better future in the US as they have a larger job market.

During my first year as an undergraduate in the US, I reapplied to other universities that I wanted to attend. I worked very hard to maintain excellent grades, and got involved in as many extra-curricular activities as I could. My plan did not work as well again, for two out of the four universities that I applied to for the second time as a transfer student rejected me. Fortunately enough, one of the universities that accepted me was my dream school: Cornell University. So here I am now, writing as a Cornellian to share my experiences.

My first year in Cornell has been great. I have learnt and experienced many things, and made really good friends. With so many different majors offered, I find it interesting to have a conversation involving people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and specialties. I am really glad about my decision, as I feel that life in the UK would not have been as great.

With the education system in the States, I find that I am consistent with my work and experience less stress as exams are evenly spread throughout the semester. In addition, grades are fairly divided into smaller components, putting less pressure on students. Although my friends in the UK have fun throughout the year, I see them struggle near year's end, often burning the midnight oil as they try to cram a year's worth of work into the space of a few weeks. Moreover, since final exams in the UK usually count for 100 per cent of the course grades, doing badly is not an option.

Another thing I learnt is that you must enjoy what you are doing in order to succeed. If you feel reluctant about doing what you are doing, chances are you will not be able to do it well. I did not enjoy my first year in the US. Not because I did not have good friends, but simply because I became too depressed when things did not go quite as planned.

And yet, planning is a step that one must never skip in life. Through planning, you can learn what you seek in life, and how you want to fulfill it. But keep in mind that a plan is only a plan until it comes true. Sometimes,

things do not work out as you want and that is perfectly normal. I did not go to the UK as I planned, and even in the US, I did not get into all the universities that I applied to. So remember this: do not be discouraged if things do not work out as planned. Keep moving forward and revise your plans accordingly – and always, always have a good time doing what you do.

*Keep moving forward and revise your plans
accordingly – and always, always have a
good time doing what you do.*

NOT FOR SALE



Mad about Multimedia

Cheng Wan Kimm, 19, is currently studying multimedia design at The One Academy. She is a part-time music teacher, specialising in piano and violin. Her many unorthodox interests include composing music, portrait drawing, and playing dance games at the arcade.

I was born into a family that takes immense pride in academic achievements. That was not a bad thing per se, and I actually proved to be quite a bright student in both primary and secondary school. Eager to please, I had never achieved less than excellent grades and was often top of my class.

This good fortune continued; I enrolled myself in the A-levels programme in Taylor's University with hopes of becoming a doctor soon after. A lot of money was at stake, but my parents were rather eager to have me become the first doctor in the family, due to parental pride and some sibling rivalry. But I digress!

As a child, I was always very interested in art. I would pick up a crayon and make a doodle of everything I saw. My love for reading and watching Japanese anime series motivated me to draw even more, spurring me to design and tinker with Photoshop later in my teenage years. I was also musically inclined – being a strings person and a happily hopeless fan of Beethoven's and Schumann's orchestral works, I loved playing in string ensembles (which I did in Taylor's as well). Besides giving piano and violin lessons, I also played music

at boutiques and shopping malls to help foot my expenses for music classes.

Taylor's was an experience like no other. I enjoyed my classes and made various unforgettable new friends. It was fun being in a predominantly male class, as I was from an all-girls convent school! However, despite all the laughter, the wonderful lecturers, and the constantly intriguing lessons, something crucial was missing. I would later discover that it was passion I lacked – passion for what I was studying.

It would be both untrue and unfair to say that I favoured fine arts over science, because both held equal importance in my heart. If I had the choice, I would become an artist, musician, and doctor simultaneously. However, I am also too spontaneous and free-spirited to settle for a life of studying and dealing with patients. Not that being a doctor is unexciting, mind you – it just wasn't the kind of excitement that I was seeking. I thrive under the adrenaline rush that comes from trying to meet a deadline, and savour the thrill of performing onstage with a violin or piano. It might be a stretch to say that my ambition is to actually be a freelance designer and music teacher while dabbling with performing and illustrating on the side, but there you go.

My parents were, as expected, not too happy with my decision of shifting to the arts, although my mother was actually rather supportive and helped me transfer to The One Academy a short while after my AS exams (the first stage of exams for A-levels students). It was a totally different environment, with a diverse spread of students and lecturers alike. Pursuing art was a breath of fresh air, for it is all about making something out of nothing. I finally feel that I have embraced my true calling by becoming a multimedia design student at that institution.

In this course, we focus on technical knowledge while honing our skills as a designer. We learn a lot about programming, coding, web design, and the works; our projects are actually really very interesting! We are given a lot of creative room to experiment, and some of our projects include Flash animations and art installations.

In multimedia design and designing with online media, the possibilities are truly endless. Online media is so *free* and uninhibited – when it comes to design, the sky is literally the limit! You could say that I am entranced with the idea of having no limitations whatsoever in designing and creating countless revolutionary design ideas. With the many kinds of tools and programmes that we have at our disposal, there is very little a multimedia designer *cannot* do or design – we are overcoming all sorts of different obstacles everyday. Technology's rapid progress is every designer's dream, for we are now given absolute free rein to create ideas that impress, engage, and enchant other people.

I am also working on my music, and if all goes well, I hope to join an orchestra later on and continue teaching while trying to be an accomplished designer. After all, if you do not take chances, you will never know what lies ahead! I was set on pursuing medicine for many years, but upon seizing an opportunity and giving arts and music a chance, I am now happier than I have ever been. And you know what they say – sometimes, you just have to go with the flow. Godspeed, I say!

*In multimedia design and designing with
online media, the possibilities are truly endless.*



Letters and Lessons

Daniel Chong, 31, completed SPM at Sekolah Sri Cempaka in 1997. He then enrolled at Kolej Damansara Utama's American University Transfer Program. He spent his junior year at SUNY Purchase College and did his senior year in France at the American University of Paris.

Dear future Daniel,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am Daniel from the present, writing an open letter to remind you of how, at the age of 30, you came to become a lecturer of Art History at a local communication design college.

As always, beginnings are hazy. Were your ancestors a class of poets, painters, artisans, and scholars? Who knows? You can only tell that your grandparents were simple first generation Chinese migrants, whose main goal was to start a new life in a new country. Both your parents were the eldest child in their families. They sought jobs in Kuala Lumpur to help support their big families living in small towns. By the time you came along in 1979, they had advanced into the middle class bracket, largely thanks to father's small business dealing with air conditioning.

Looking back at your roots, you found no known history relating to foreign exposure, higher education, or the arts. As you grew up, the third generation of your Malaysian Chong family would open such pathways. Amy, the eldest, did not finish college, yet ventured to work in England and Japan. Bernard,

your eldest brother, went to England and returned with a degree in Law. Christopher, your second brother, who drew since childhood, did a diploma in Graphic Design locally and is working in advertising today.

When it came to your turn to choose your path after SPM, you decided to study Art History. Why such an obscure subject? As a child, your exposure to Christopher's drawing habits was a big influence. Winning an international children's art competition reinforced that interest. However, by your early teens, you were more preoccupied with reading and became rather bored by your incessant doodles of giant robots and *manga* girls.

Thankfully, your interest in art received a second jolt of life when you conducted research for your PMR projects at the Kuala Lumpur Memorial Library. You discovered a series of books, shelved away in a corner, containing beautiful colour reproductions of great masterpieces by the geniuses of art. Since then, discovering humanity's long journey through such magnificent creations has never ceased to stimulate your imagination and make your skin tingle. Other places near the library also fuelled your passion: namely, the National Art Gallery and the early Petronas Gallery.

To convince your parents to support your pursuit of an impractical field of studies, you had to score well for your SPM. You discovered the job prospects for art history degree holders by interviewing people in the art field, applying for an internship in the National Art Gallery, and working part-time in an art gallery. In college, you took a variety of courses in your college's American University Transfer Programme to be sure that you were not being too obsessed or narrow-minded. When the time came, you left to study the subject overseas. Local colleges did not offer Art History degrees and scholarships did not sponsor such subjects. Despite the massive cost, you managed to get through with the help of your family, some financial aid, part-time jobs, and being as frugal as your grandparents were when they arrived in a new country.

Upon your return from Paris in 2004, you found a job at a leading local private art gallery. You were the Resource Manager in charge of the gallery's small art library and public outreach programme. Despite the very modest

salary, it was wonderful that you could continue your love affair with books and art. Nonetheless, trying to share your passion with the public proved difficult as libraries became unpopular in the internet age. Working closely with something you love can also destroy its charm. The longer you stayed on that job, the less you read, and art became cold merchandise. Thus, your job performance deteriorated, and the gallery would discontinue your service.

Somehow, this feeling was not true when you were teaching. At first, teaching was something you did for additional income. The more teaching jobs you took on, the more you felt alive and in love with art and reading again. Everything that had accumulated in you through your travels, studies, and experiences could now be imparted to hundreds of eager students. Ironically, despite all that time spent in libraries and museums, the most important lesson you can teach today is that art is not something exclusive to artists or found only in galleries; just as everything and everyone has a history, art can be made by anyone and found in anything.

All you need is curiosity, an open mind, and close attention to the things that make your skin tingle. Daniel, I hope that decades later, you will be reminded of this path you took, and continue to share with others the things that have enriched you most in life.

Sincerely,
Daniel Chong
June 28, 2009

Art is not something exclusive to artists or found only in galleries; just as everything and everyone has a history, art can be made by anyone and found in anything.



“C” for Comeback

Derek Tan, 25, is a beautifully-deranged, evil social media specialist. He survived education at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, graduating with a Bachelor’s Degree in Management, and enjoys basketball when unleashed from work.

I still vividly remember that day as my fingers danced across the keyboard. It was the day I got 58 per cent for my English essay. To be exact, it was 2002 when I was still a Form Five student about to sit for my SPM. I have never forgotten how I asked my teacher for the reason behind my ‘punishment’ and never got an answer in return. Until today, I still do not understand what warranted such a letdown. Although the pain has evaporated, the memories remain.

The incident made a serious dent in my confidence, which was only partially restored when I began pursuing a business degree in New Zealand. I never felt comfortable writing again for many years and dismissed it from my thoughts. My life took me on a whirlwind of adventures from being a disaster recovery-planning consultant at Pricewaterhouse Coopers, to working as a tax consultant at Ernst & Young. It became even more bizarre when I emerged as an event producer at Marcus Evans before trotting along to become a strategist at Sime Darby. I finally landed at AirAsia in September 2008, where everything suddenly made sense.

In the end, that slap in the face kick-started my love affair with writing.

It came back to haunt me time and again during my varsity days whenever my English professor tempted me to write. Although I never gave in to the temptation, I began to wonder if that incident back in Form Five happened for a reason.

During my days at Pricewaterhouse Coopers, I realised I had to try my hand at writing, believing that I could make a difference through trying again. Nevertheless, I kept my newfound confidence under the radar. At Ernst & Young, I got acquainted with numbers. On the other hand, my pet projects got me writing again. It became clear that my journey of self-discovery had begun.

By the time I was knocking at the doors of Marcus Evans, I had fallen in love with the written word all over again. With unlimited freedom, the joy of writing began seeping into me and I did not fear writing anymore. Sime Darby was supposed to cement a legitimate career for me in the corporate world. Nevertheless, I ended up writing for companies and their presidents, chairmen, and CEOs. That was the seal on the deal, the sign of things to come.

I began fiddling with the world of communications while at Sime Darby but never took it seriously. But guess what? All it took was my writing of a blog post on a fictionalized trip to Hangzhou that touched on the elements of travel which exceeded the mere sights, sounds and senses – to me, there are cultural treasures we often ignore, like Hangzhou's legend of Lady White Snake – and attending a formal interview with AirAsia, I now write for a living as a corporate blogger for AirAsia.

I have been given the opportunity to run my own projects, and since then, I have been opening doors for other youths to achieve their dreams, beginning with this pilot project. We used social media in an academic result driven selection for the prestigious position of pilots, which was the first of its kind in the world.

The selection was covered by World News, Reuters, and other regional papers including Blog Herald. It was also broadcasted on radio stations in South Africa, Singapore, Russia, the UK, Europe, and South America. Applications totaled over 500, with 200 hopefuls from around the world applying, although

it was clearly stated that the position was only for Malaysians. We had over 300,000 hits, more than a thousand comments, and countless blog mentions.

Since then, my job scope has evolved and my designation is now AirAsia's Social Media Specialist. I personally oversee a regional team with three of us in Malaysia, one in Thailand and another in Indonesia. We have been to creative sessions with Google and were also among the sponsors of YES 2009. AirAsia has also been used as a case study for social media in regional conferences and other forums. We also developed the leading corporate account in Malaysia for Twitter, corporate blog, and Facebook.

Now, the sky is the limit and the proverb that the pen is mightier than the sword has never proven to be truer. I anticipate that the writing world will further evolve with the advent of technology. I have never written the way I did eight years ago and I do not think I ever will. It is surprising how a "C" can take you to places your heart never knew.

Some call it a full circle, but Thomas Jefferson said it best during the Declaration of Independence: each of us has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Everyday, I wake up wishing my fairytale could go on for just one more day.

Thomas Jefferson said it best during the Declaration of Independence: each of us has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.



The Gift of Gab

Didi Jaafar, 20, is a degree student in Communication and Media Management under the Taylor's World Class Scholarship.

She will be interning with leading advertising agency, Universal McCann. Besides aspiring to host her own talk show, she often travels the world with Anthony Bourdain to sample food, with him on the television screen while she sits on the couch munching a packet of potato chips.

Coming from SMK Assunta PJ, an established school, one would think that I am from an affluent family. Sure, we had our good times when my father was the General Manager of a public listed company, but he was laid off when the recession hit Malaysia and we were badly affected. Thereafter, my father started a corporate training company but business was slow due to the economic downturn. This might sound a bit melodramatic, but at that point in time, we had no car and I walked to school. I knew immediately that I had to ace my SPM to secure a scholarship and ease my father's financial burden, as he was already paying for my two elder sisters' education.

Now the big question: did I know what I wanted to study? This I knew: I hated math as I cannot stand the sight of numbers (though I wanted a pay cheque with lots of zeros at the end). Science did not thrill me either, and in no way was I to pursue art, as I could not draw to save my life! But one thing was for sure – I realised that I had the gift of gab. It occurred to me that I

enjoyed talking in front of a crowd and people actually do listen to me. So perhaps an education in communication was best.

As I had nothing to lose, I applied for a few scholarships from various institutions. Word to the wise – make a point to enquire about these scholarships, as the forms should be distributed online and to school counsellors by mid June/July.

Eventually, I secured the Taylor's World Class Scholarship to pursue a degree in Communication and Media Management. I still remember the day of the interview as if it was yesterday. Waking up that morning, I was my normal self: zero confidence, upset tummy, no appetite, and thinking of ways to get out of this situation – typical me. Okay, I did not have zero confidence, but I did not want to get my hopes up high either.

When I was informed that I aced the interview, I was ecstatic! Prior to this, I had never given myself credit for my achievements, thinking that I made it out of pure luck (and some pixie dust). It never occurred to me that I was blessed with that special something that helped me stand out on many occasions. Thus, it is imperative to identify your strengths and work on them.

I have never participated in a public speaking competition before, having little confidence in myself. Still, I wanted to try something new. So there we were, my three friends and I competing in the ESU Malaysia-The Star-HSBC Public Speaking Competition. Walking in with no expectations, I was blown away when they announced that I was the 1st runner-up in the nationals. With that, I was on my way to London for the ESU International Public Speaking Competition representing Malaysia. Who would have thought a first timer like myself could make it this far!

All 77 participants had different views on the theme, 'Regeneration and Renewal'. I almost got a heart attack upon realising that a girl from Moldova had a similar topic as mine: organ donation! I started to hyperventilate, hoping not to be placed together in the same group. I was placed in Heat 3 together with 17 other participants from nine countries and thankfully, she was not one of them!

When it was my turn to speak, the only thought in my mind was, "Didi,

do not make a fool of yourself?" I stood there – the judges looked at me, I looked at them, and a chain reaction started. My legs were shaking, my voice squeaking at a few places. Despite that, I came well prepared. My speech came from my heart, and I was sure the audience and the judges would remember me as the fidgety girl who wanted to donate her organs.

I was shocked when my name was called out. Not only did I make it to the finals, I won the Best Non-Native English Speaker Award! Thus, you must give yourself the opportunity to try new things. In any case, speak from your heart, you will never go wrong.

Personally, I set new targets each semester and work hard to achieve them. Setbacks happen but never let them bog you down. If you are not academically inclined, do not give up as opportunities to excel come in many forms. You can be a world class sportsman like Dato' Lee Chong Wei, a talented singer finishing first in One in a Million, or an engaging cook like Chef Wan!

The list is endless and it is up to you to make it happen!

*If you are not academically inclined, do not give up
as opportunities to excel come in many forms.*



YES to Change

Dina Murad, 21, is eccentric, offbeat, and often confused. She is currently enrolled in IIUM/UIA's English Language and Literature undergraduate course. Dina is simple and prefers to spend her days taking things slowly. Her passion is to travel and to discover different cultures.

Before I begin, I have a confession to make. Studying in general was never really my fortē. I lacked vigour and enthusiasm, stumbled my way across my school days, but managed to scrape through with a presentable SPM certificate. Perhaps my lack of effort was a result of my not knowing what I wanted for my future. All I knew was that I wanted to travel the world, be immeasurably rich, and disgustingly powerful.

By the time I was in Form 5, I was acquainted with AFS *Antarabudaya Malaysia*, a non-governmental organisation focused on student exchange programmes. This was because my family hosted a high school German exchange student (Monika, or Murni as she likes to be called) when I was 14. The more I learnt about AFS, the more the idea of going abroad for a year appealed to me. AFS' goal was to create peace through intercultural understanding with exchange programmes; I was all up for world betterment and instilling some cultural diversity in my life. After all, the application fee was only RM20!

However, I had to face a major barrier before I made my decision. Should

I be accepted as an exchange student, my family would not be able to provide full financial support for me. There were scholarships for AFS programmes, but many of them were only partial, and even a partial payment was a heavy burden for my family to bear. Even if I used my savings and worked part-time, the final cost would still not only burn a hole in my pocket, but set fire to my trousers as well! Though RM20,000 for a year abroad is actually reasonable when you think of how much you spend on necessities here in Malaysia, paying that amount up front was still rather difficult for me to manage. However, fear not – when abroad, your food and lodging expenses are covered by AFS.

This was about the time I found out about the YES scholarship. Funded by the US State department, it is a full scholarship for six months to the US granted to some 40 Malaysian students yearly. To ease post-September 11 tensions, the scholarship was given to students of countries with a predominant Muslim population, although students of all religions may apply. Of course, decent grades were a must, as we had to maintain a good GPA in America. Thankfully, I managed to overcome that hurdle with my high school results. After months of applications, I was overjoyed to receive a letter stating that I was accepted and that I was to leave for Indiana, US in the coming January.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that the 39 YES scholars in my batch consisted of students from many different states, races, social backgrounds, personalities, and quirks. AFS Malaysia also made it a point to include disabled students in every batch, and mine had two hearing impaired girls. Even the *Orang Asli* students were not forgotten as a friend who went with me represented an *Orang Asli* settlement from Perak.

In the US, I was given one of the best experiences in my life. I stayed with a host family for the duration of my exchange – my host father was a high school English teacher and my host mother ran a day care centre. I also had two toddler brothers in the house so I was exposed to different levels of childhood education.

Being alone in a country foreign to me had its benefits. I became more outspoken and confident. I also became more mature in my thinking and actions. I began to value different cultures and also realised how much I loved

my homeland. I found myself more accepting of others, as I wanted others to be accepting of me. I managed to make amazing friends that I still keep in close contact with.

I finally found myself truly excelling in academic subjects as the American education system allowed me a more liberal selection in courses such as computer design, literature, journalism etc. Even their methods of teaching subjects like History differed; while I used to fail miserably in Malaysia, I managed to maintain high distinctions in American History throughout my stay.

In the end, my experience gave me an accurate reflection of who I am, and exposed another side of me I never thought I might see. After returning to Malaysia, I realised what I wanted for myself: to do something I enjoyed, instead of merely doing what was typically accepted as a 'proper future' and having a thoroughly miserable time trying to please everyone else but myself. So far, I am enjoying my Literature lessons and am extremely glad that I chose this path.

*Being alone in a country foreign to me
had its benefits.*



Life's a Bumper Sticker

Dominic Lucien Luk, 27, from Kota Kinabalu, is currently pursuing graduate studies in Musicology and Gender Studies at Brandeis University. He attended primary and secondary school in Sabah, moved to Kuala Lumpur, then traipsed to Singapore for his Bachelor's degree in Classical Music. He has also worked as a music teacher.

I used to have this bright yellow bumper sticker stuck to the rear window of my car. It read, "There are three kinds of people: those who let things happen, those who make things happen, and those who wonder what happened." I never bothered to think which category I fell into, because it was just one of those silly bumper stickers everyone had.

I could not wait for SPM to be over. I wanted my 'real' future to begin. I already knew what I wanted to study, and I roughly knew what kind of future I wanted. When I was in Form Two, I decided that music was my passion. I wanted to study music in college, which I eventually did. In hindsight, it was this passion for music that shaped my future. I always imagined that I would immediately fly off to some distant country after SPM and pursue my dreams of studying music in the greatest conservatories of the world. It never happened because sometimes, as I realised, it is better to just let things happen.

I was never much of a computer geek, but I thought it would be beneficial to do something apart from music just for fun. That was when I had a great

year of self-discovery, where I pursued and successfully completed a one-year diploma course in Computer Studies at Institut Sinaran in Sabah. I also became President of the Student Council there, and learnt how to make things happen.

Like Spiderman, I was often reminded that “with great power, comes great responsibility”. I had an amazing experience juggling studying for an intensive diploma course and dealing with student affairs and events on campus. Until today, I have fond memories of that year. During that time, I also continued conducting choirs and taking music lessons, for my dream to study music at tertiary level was still driving me to venture far away and study in some prestigious university.

That did not come to pass. Again, I submitted myself to circumstances, and allowed things to happen. I applied to a number of American colleges and got accepted, but the aftermath of September 11 was still haunting many, and the economy was not good either. Hence, I ended up studying music at University College Sedaya International (UCSI) for a few years. I decided to take the opportunity to learn as much as I could, and meet as many fellow Malaysian musicians as possible. I did exactly that, in addition to getting heavily involved in student activities and once again, being President of the Student Council. It was in KL that I got busy with theatre and film projects because I longed for new experiences and to be part of the buzz surrounding the industry.

During those years, I worked part-time as a teacher because I enjoyed teaching very much, plus I needed money to pay the bills. I taught singing around KL and trained a few school choirs. It was a very fulfilling experience learning from my students and teaching myself to be humble. Still, I knew I wanted more in my life.

I ended up completing my bachelor's degree in Singapore, a place where I learnt so much about my musical personality, and more importantly, my personal identity. Great mentors guided me in the development of my potential. I tried my best to make things happen, for I thought to myself that if I wanted to fulfill my dreams of studying music in America, I would have to

work hard for it. I took part in concerts, took up leadership roles, performed in nationwide events, and even began attending 'Alphonsian Spirituality' classes under a seminary in Singapore.

After a long and patient wait, I finally set foot on American soil. I am now pursuing my graduate studies in Musicology and Gender Studies. I plan to specialise in Russian Classical Music and teach at college level when my studies are over.

I look back quite often on the past years and wonder what happened. My plans were always interrupted by financial crises and terrorist attacks. Yet, it all ended up almost perfect, and I am contented with every single step I have taken thus far. However, I do think a lot about what will happen next.

What's after SPM? It depends on what you choose to make happen. Will it always turn out well? Maybe not, but every opportunity in life is a learning experience towards something greater. Is life easy after SPM? Not all the time, but it sure is exciting!

Thinking back about that yellow bumper sticker, there are three kinds of people. I have been, and still am, all three of them.

*There are three kinds of people: those who
let things happen, those who make things happen,
and those who wonder what happened.*



In Theatre

Emmet Lee, 24, thinks that the world would be a happier place, if only everyone did a little bit of theatre. He is also a big fan of impulse, intuition and randomness.

At 19, I was bored.

I had grown incredibly weary of the dreary, straightforward life that I had led for as long as I can remember. I was tired of just about everything – of school and studying, of doing the same old things in the same old places, of people around me, and most of all, of routine. I despaired of my surroundings.

I decided that I needed a change. My life till then had been terribly controlled, so the natural counteraction was obvious – I had to be more impulsive and more random. Impulsive, mind you, not reckless. I would act on any whim of mine, as long as there was a reasonable chance that I would not regret those actions in twenty years. It so happened that this carefree phase coincided with my departure for a college in the United States, which was, depending on who you ask, incredibly fortunate or unfortunate.

Most people opine that college is the time for people to explore opportunities and “opportunities” that would not come by post-graduation. I embraced this school of thought devotedly. While I was course-hunting, I stumbled upon a particularly foreign course of study – theatre. Having made the vow to do just about anything that interested me in college, I decided that I would give theatre a try by signing up for an acting class.

I will be the first to admit that the thought of studying theatre overseas was a little intimidating. For one, I had never done theatre before – or any other form of performing arts, for that matter. I still remember how uncomfortable I felt during the first day in class, surrounded by other kids who looked as if they had been doing it their whole lives.

Over the next two years, theatre became one of the most amazing experiences of my college life. For a field that is probably considered frivolous by half the Malaysian population, theatre has proved to be remarkably useful. For starters, studying acting has improved my poker game by helping me conceal my hands and improving my read on my opponents. I cannot even begin to remember the number of times that acting has helped me draw a bad call or lay down.

I jest, but only partly. Part of the study of acting involves deriving, understanding, and internalizing character objectives and emotions, the vast majority of which are human*. Hence, from my point of view, acting provides two potential benefits beyond theatre. Firstly, the deep study of character can at times stimulate an internal psychological investigation into human behavior, replete with human desires and fears. Secondly, and in a not-completely-unrelated vein, acting can improve our understanding of human emotions and how we exhibit them – hence my earlier reference to poker – thus improving our understanding of the essence of communication.

In my sophomore year, as part of what had now become my major, I took some classes in theatre history. I was again amazed at the insight that theatre could provide in deciphering everything from the cultural to the political and social structure of civilizations – from ancient civilizations to our very own. Elements such as the internal structure of theatres can reveal a wealth of information about the distribution of political power in a society. Analyses of contents of plays, on the other hand, not only give insight to the culture of the period, but also to changes in societal welfare. The development of the melodrama, for instance, coincided with a burgeoning middle class in Europe who demanded plays that featured their everyday lives instead of the seemingly alien lives of aristocrats.

Theatre has also introduced me to the most diverse group of people I have ever encountered, both in and out of class. Among these is a Persian-American, who has an amazing tenor voice and an intense interest in LGBT elements in and out of theatre, and whose dad is an Imam but whose mom is a devout Catholic. He is also the only Muslim I know who has ever played Jesus in an Easter play in church. Many of my friends would be considered highly dysfunctional (from our local perspective, at least) – some drink too often to possibly be healthy, while some others are recreational pot users, but all of them are wonderful human beings who have incredible character, and sometimes intimidating talents.

Therein lies the uniqueness of theatre – to some extent, and somewhat ironically, it encourages its participants to be themselves. Actors need to have a good sense of who they are in order to dispose of their own natural tendencies, so that they can more accurately portray others. In this sense, people from theatre are some of the most honest and open people that I have ever met.

If I had to name my biggest regret from my past couple of years, it would be that I had not devoutly followed up on my pledge to be more impulsive. This newfound willingness to explore has produced some of the richest moments of my life to date, though it has also produced a comparable number of less desirable situations. But hey, what is life without some spice?

**Note: It can, however, be argued that non-human characters in theatre (such as cats or fairies or trees) are also scripted to display human-like emotions.*

Actors need to have a good sense of who they are in order to dispose of their own natural tendencies, so that they can more accurately portray others.



An Engineer's Story

Eng Kian Shen, 24, studied Electronics Engineering, majoring in Computers, at Multimedia University. He has limited achievements but loves to share his thoughts and opinions.

I spend an average of six hours a day in front of the computer, not all of them productive. Five minutes ago, I was staring at my monitor thinking of what to write for my thesis. I am a final year engineering student and am writing this to share my story; one that I think will be helpful to you in choosing your path in engineering.

When I was young, I loved to question everything that happened around me, like how a television works, or how a plane flies. Fast forward to life after SPM – my results were considered above average and I managed to get myself into a private university. I chose engineering for two reasons. The first was peer influence, which is one of the most common mistakes every undergraduate makes, while the second was because I thought engineering could answer most of the questions I had regarding the world.

An engineering student's life starts with learning fundamental scientific knowledge and mathematics. We learn mathematics that is not applicable in any daily task, the sort that requires a whole page of A4 paper just to derive a single formula. We learn the basics of electrical and electronic components, how current and voltage work in a circuit. We also learn programming – not the cool stuff you see in the movies, but lines of code which function in a way

that most can hardly understand.

Engineering students may find their first year difficult and boring, and risk losing interest in it. However, interest comes from the urge to learn, even if most think that learning the fundamentals are less important. Thus, it would be wise to remember that we could not have achieved more advanced technology without mathematics derived a century ago, and circuitry principles discovered decades ago.

The story continues with me completing my first year as an engineering student with little interest and faith in engineering. With little interest, you spend limited effort on the knowledge you pursue. Just like most of my peers, I wasted more time on computer games than on my studies. With weak fundamentals, the following years become even tougher, and one's interest declines proportionally. This is when you see university students dealing with their studies by copying reports from seniors, doing tutorials and past year papers just before exams without sufficient understanding of the concepts, and struggling to complete their thesis in order to graduate.

The interesting parts of engineering are usually forgotten by most engineering students a few years into the course. With weak fundamental knowledge, it is hard to study engineering related topics in-depth. The pursuit of engineering knowledge is fun, interesting, and aimed towards discovering how certain applications can improve our lifestyle.

Engineering is very wide and I can only share my experiences in the electronics field. Electronic Engineering deals with electronic devices. A common project throughout the course will be to develop your very own MP3 player. Common MP3 players, like iPods, consist of two categories, the hardware and the firmware. The hardware is the body of the device and firmware will be the program and its user interface.

Ever wondered how those iPods work? It has a microcontroller to control all the algorithms and instructions, a DAC (digital analogue converter) to convert stored data or songs in digital binary code into continuous analogue wave signals for sound, flash memory to store data (songs), LCD display for displaying purposes and also other circuits for power and protection. An

undergraduate will design and develop a prototype of the MP3 player, and also write codes for the microcontroller. After a number of improvements to the hardware and firmware, an advanced MP3 player like the iPod is produced. Even the electronics field can be sub-divided into many majors, such as development of nanotechnology and communications development in radio frequency, wireless, and networking.

If I had a chance to do it again, I would master my fundamental knowledge so that I would be more interested in engineering, and writing a thesis on the stuff I researched would be much more fun.

For SPM leavers who plan to pursue engineering, it is imperative that you have an interest in engineering. Secondly, be very determined in pursuing your interest, even though it may be difficult at the beginning. Look at the course outline of the subjects offered so that you can look forward to what interests you, and choose the engineering path that interests you most. Thirdly, master the fundamentals well.

I have never regretted taking engineering, as I believe everything happens for a reason. By pursuing engineering, I found out that my interests are not only limited to technology, but also other fields of knowledge, including nature, politics and economics. And yes, I shall pursue my interests with more determination in the future.

*I have never regretted taking engineering,
as I believe everything happens for a reason.*



The Autodidact

Gabrielle Chong Yong Wei, 21, welcomes job offers, party invites, romantic confessions, credit card numbers, and ice-cream vouchers at gabriellogy@gmail.com.

I'm currently studying philosophy at a top school in the States. For boring details on how I got there, see <http://wellesley4msia.wordpress.com>.

Now, my story: my life as a student is characterised by a few dominant trends.

1. Firstly, it's very fluctuative. I spent 11 years in a conservative Chinese school, and now I am in a liberal arts environment. I have won popular votes in school for Head Prefect by a landslide margin (which I didn't get anyway). I was also notorious, having spent much time standing under the sun, being kicked out of classes on a daily basis, and washing school toilets. I have been an archetypal straight-A student. I have also taken three gap years and very nearly gotten myself expelled. I have been rejected by every single scholarship I applied for in Malaysia. I am also the current recipient of a bond-free scholarship worth USD 240,000.00.

Job-wise, I sold lingerie (when I was 15), mopped floors, and washed dishes while squatting beside a dirty drain. I have also shadowed a politician in Parliament as an attaché, pissed off politicians while I was interning as a journalist, and worked for a consulting firm. So I

have long understood that life is always going to be turbulent, and I try to make the best out of every situation.

2. Secondly, I am irritatingly determined. When I was in Form 1, I asked the debate coach if she would allow me to observe the Form 5 debaters during training. She said no (I was still speaking in broken English back then). So when I was in Form 3, I spent a whole year compiling news clippings to prove I was sincere about learning how to debate, and laid the two-inch thick archive in front of the coach. A year later, I led the school in becoming the first Chinese school to enter the finals of a 40-year old tournament.

Another time, I heard that one of the most prestigious world debate tournaments was going to be held in KL, so I called the organisers for permission to be an adjudicator as well as a discount on the fees that I could not afford. I turned up quietly, no one realised I was a kid, and I had the privilege of adjudicating teams like Oxford. I could not actually understand all the topics and trembled throughout the time I was sitting beside senior members of the world adjudicating council. But I wanted to be there so badly to learn, you know?

I am also relatively financially disadvantaged (trivia: mother was a refugee), so I always find means to compensate for lack of cultural capital. I used to skip lunch every single day throughout Form 4–5 to save money for books. With no Internet access at home, I did my university applications at a sleazy cyber café. I even wrote at least six different drafts for the essay you're reading right now. They're all equally dull, but my point is: I try really, really hard.

3. Thirdly, I have a pretty high sense of agency. Even as an obnoxious little kid, I was quite enterprising. As an 8-year old, I set up my own business selling hand-drawn comics to classmates – unfortunately, the class bully took all my profits anyway. I also tried to make my own homemade explosives (again, I'm not setting myself up as a role model). At 10, I designed my own encryption code, pen-and-paper games, and catapult (all useful things in the classroom), as well as built

my own foosball table and telescope. I was also vocal about the things I believed in – I wrote my first letter to the newspaper editor when I was 11 – published in its original, oafish handwriting – and wrote my life manifesto at 14.

Fast forward to the present. I still believe in taking initiative for whatever you want to learn, or express, in life. I want to teach myself so many things before I graduate – programming, couchsurfing, parkour, drawing graphic novels, building Goldberg machines, stock trading etc. I believe that education, at its most salient level, is about experiencing life in all its abundance and is much too important to place as a responsibility on parents, formal education, or any employer.

Now, you realise all these things don't have any direct impact on my post-SPM life. You're right – it's impossible to map the chains of causation in my life neatly onto a matrix. But I think it is the subtle factors that impact your life most as a young adult, long after the joy of a scholarship offer, the disappointment of a Harvard rejection, or the assumption of leadership positions – things that compete to define your profile but say nothing about your fears, drives, pains, and dreams.

The last thing I want to say is that I want to come back someday and serve Malaysia, and you are the reason why I came up with the idea for this book; you give me hope for this country. And I hope you feel the same way about yourself.

You are the reason why I came up with the idea for this book; you give me hope for this country.



An Unforgettable Lesson

Ganesh Raj Kumaraguru, 20, is living a longtime dream by pursuing a 4-year undergraduate course at Stanford University. Throughout his life, he had many colourful experiences and all of them played a big role in helping him achieve his dream. He will share a meaningful experience that taught him something he could never have learnt from school.

Philanthropy is often seen as giving service, be it time or money, to the poor. While this is true in many ways, only the people who actually carry it out truly know how this act can lead to great eye-openers, often revolutionising our thoughts and changing our perception of the world around us.

I was lucky that philanthropic activities are organised regularly in my school. To share all my experiences will probably sound like a clichéd story since words can never do justice to an actual experience. Hence, I am going to focus on a single moment that opened up a new channel of thought as to why people experience poverty.

It was the summer holidays, when my two friends and I decided to teach a few children from a scavenger site (these kids collect rubbish and sell recyclable items for a living making about Rp20 000 a day – roughly RM7). The group of children were mainly 8 to 11-year olds except for a married couple, a 19-year old guy called Sauri and his 17-year old wife. Sauri struck me as

incredibly enthusiastic in class and a fast learner in mathematics.

One of my teachers got him a job as a gardener in my school, which would triple his salary yet trim his work hours significantly. I was in the room with the both of them during the discussion. To my surprise, Sauri turned down the offer!

He was afraid that this job would require him to stay in the school instead. Despite trying to convince him repeatedly that he would be home by 5 p.m. everyday, he remained afraid. I was astonished. Isn't it obvious to go for a job that both reduced your working hours and increased your salary, providing a route out of the cycle of poverty?

It only struck me several hours later that it was the lack of opportunities that blinded Sauri. Since he rarely experienced life changing chances, he was also oblivious to new chances that emerged. Despite his willingness to learn, he was not used to this kind of life changing opportunities. He had not been taught to take risks, to get out of his comfort zone, or to leave what had become a part of his life. However, it is only human nature to resist change that is not fully understood, as there is always fear of the unexpected.

Those who get out of their comfort zone and try something completely different – whether it is teaching children, building schools, or caring for the sick – always experience a change in perception. These new experiences shed light on facts that may be otherwise overlooked.

Then, we finally see how much we have misunderstood – or did not fully understand – the things that are uncommon to us. It is the same with the very poor, except they have to take what appears to be a bigger risk since they do not have the money to make ends meet if something does go wrong. The fear in their lives makes it more difficult for them to take that first uncertain step out of poverty.

I finally learnt that although important, it is not the amount of money and time spent for the impoverished that mattered most. It is understanding their thoughts and opinions on matters that are crucial to them. If we understand

their fears and what motivates them, it would be easier to help them get out of poverty. If we can understand how that tight rope of survival they are walking on does not allow much room for trying new jobs or lifestyles, we can then refocus our efforts to ensure that opportunities are not only provided, but also seized.

However, it is only human nature to resist change that is not fully understood, as there is always fear of the unexpected.

NOT FOR SALE



Passion for Physiotherapy

Geetha Anbalagan, 22, is a self-proclaimed feminist currently pursuing her Physiotherapy degree, dreaming of the day the studying ends so she can resume her personal mission of finding a superhero (but may settle for a rock star) and wishing for a life full of adventure and picket signs.

I, like every other student out there, was faced with the hard question of, “What’s after SPM?” My ambitions ranged from being a world-renowned geneticist to some sort of superhero doctor! However, the fact remained that I just did not know what to do. Nothing seemed to click! And so Form Six happened. As the saying goes, “When in doubt, do Form Six”. I needed more time to decide, and Form Six was the cheapest option. A-levels or any other foundation course was too expensive, even if I could land a partial scholarship for myself.

Form Six is no walk in the park. It is a two-year programme and the only government Pre-U course that is internationally recognised. For only a few hundred ringgit, you stand the same chance as the A-levels qualifiers in applying for universities overseas, and it is also the only other Pre-U course other than matriculation that qualifies you to apply to local universities. The only catch? It is exactly like school! Once you get past the homework, the school hours, the uniform, and the constant revision that is an absolute must, you are set for the supposedly wonderful things in your glorious future.

The 'click' I needed suddenly happened merely months after I enrolled for Form Six. My father's friend came over one day and randomly started talking about physiotherapy. This intrigued me! I had already decided that medicine was not my cup of tea. It was too long and just too expensive. The next thing I knew, I started researching Physiotherapy, and I soon realised it had everything I wanted in a career: meeting people and talking to them!

Soon after my STPM results scared us all (the horror!), I quickly enrolled myself for the physiotherapy degree in MAHSA College. It was the first and only private university in Malaysia that offered a degree in Physiotherapy. So here I am, one year later, loving the course and not regretting my decision.

I absolutely love the people I meet when I am in local hospitals for my clinical placements because a huge part of physiotherapy is actually talking to your patients and knowing their story. You would be surprised how easily the most mundane of activities can cause injuries! Among the most interesting people I have met so far are those who survived the Japanese Occupation, those scarred by horrible memories but with memorable life lessons to share with naive youngsters who have so much to say about anything and everything. They come for Physiotherapy sessions to mend something, but I love to listen to them as if I am a psychiatrist.

I have seen patients who could not walk after a surgery learned to walk again from using a walking frame to walking without any aid; that is what physiotherapy does – magic! I have also seen former stroke patients who could move their paralysed limbs again and lead almost normal lives, and all this happened with exercises and some good advice. Being by your patients' side when they can move their toes again or finally sleep without that back pain is an amazing feeling, I assure you.

It is amazing how people, no matter their age, are pretty much the same when they are in pain or afraid; a little patience and tender care goes a long way. It is very important to have that special bond with your patients so they trust you enough to let you work your magic in getting them better. And it is that bond that I personally find interesting – how perfect strangers come together in times of need after just a session or two.

I also believe we need more dedicated health care workers in government hospitals, as the public services in Malaysia have a lot of room for growth and improvement. Any average income family in Malaysia would tell you that they have been to a government hospital but absolutely dread the service. I for one am all too familiar with this. It is the cheapest health care service in the country and I strongly feel it is where dedicated people are most needed. This is my chance to give back to the people that need it the most, namely the poor that cannot afford a 100 ringgit session of Physiotherapy, or the government servants who do not make as much as the General Manager of a company.

The thought of being a dedicated physiotherapist who guides an old woman from an estate (who cannot afford any private healthcare service) to better health is really all you need to keep going. It is definitely the only reason I need to be a Physiotherapist.

*It is amazing how people, no matter their age,
are pretty much the same when they are in pain
or afraid; a little patience and tender care
goes a long way.*



Where is my Horse?

Goh Jing Pei, 25, never left Malaysia before age 22.

This small town girl has been blessed with more than one generous scholarship although she was once called “the laziest girl in class” by a local newspaper. She is heading to the University of Oregon as a Fulbright Fellow to pursue a Master of Arts degree.

There is a famous Chinese proverb, *Sai Weng shi ma* (literally translated as “Sai Weng lost his horse”), which means that in life, both gains and losses are unpredictable. The story that inspired the proverb concerns a man named Sai Weng, who owned a beautiful horse and regarded it as a personal treasure. However, the horse became a bane when his son broke his leg while riding it. Later, his fortune changed again when his son was spared from enlistment in the army due to his broken leg. Like Sai Weng, I have had my fair share of initially disappointing experiences that turned out to be blessings in disguise.

I attended vernacular primary and secondary schools in Butterworth. My school is reputable for producing many ‘A scorers’ in public examinations. Yet I was a reluctant ‘A scorer’; instead of attending endless tuition classes, I spent most of my time reading Chinese literature, listening to the Beatles, and interacting with different personalities throughout my five years in high school. Like most of my peers, I knew for a fact that my parents could not afford private tertiary education. I was not the brightest student, and I did not earn titles like ‘10 A1s Scorer’ to win a PSD/JPA scholarship. Thus, I had it all

figured out way before SPM – try out STPM with the hope that I could get into a public university!

Since I had it all figured out, the preparation for STPM was a long and torturous process – I was impatient and found it hard to tolerate cramming as the ‘only pathway to success’. However, I thought it would be fun to take up an additional subject in STPM: Chinese Literature. Most of my friends and teachers discouraged my decision; they thought it would jeopardise my chances of getting into university and my desired programmes, since my school could not provide classes for the subject. I dismissed their thoughtful advice despite knowing that I had to face the reality of juggling five subjects, helping out my parents (they run a home confectionary), and learning an extra subject on my own.

Unexpectedly, I survived STPM as one of the top scorers in the nation and won the HSBC scholarship to cover my bachelor degree’s tuition and expenses. I was all set for the long-awaited and supposedly exciting journey ahead of me. Many would think that a smooth-sailing road had begun, what with my enrolment into my desired programme at Universiti Malaya: East Asian Studies and International Relations.

However, university life turned out to be quite disappointing. I soon realised that it was too conservative and stifling for both my intellectual and personal growth. Given my broad interest and thirst for learning, I became frustrated and upset when I found myself lacking exposure in all aspects: social, cultural, global, and technical.

I had a few options ahead of me: sulk about my less-than-positive experience, leave university, or simply make the best out of what I have in hand. To cut the long story short: I decided that I did not want to leave what I had started.

An abundance of rewarding and memorable experiences followed: I finally travelled to a foreign country for the first time when I was selected to participate in a global venture capital programme, in which I worked with eight team members from different continents for two weeks; graduated as the only student majoring in China Studies; travelled with youths from all

over the world in various cities in China; recorded and launched a music album with my band; led two global conferences simultaneously with students from Harvard University; worked in a consulting firm and built strong professional relationships with colleagues and clients; volunteered with a local NGO; won a prestigious scholarship and got accepted into Yale and Stanford, and of course, spent months working with an amazing team to make this book possible for other Malaysian youths!

Opportunities come in various form and shapes. Retrospectively, I am more than fortunate to have been given many opportunities to learn and constantly challenge myself to reach higher. My turning point came when I changed my perspective: I eventually came to terms with the limitations I was facing and learned how to embrace and address them positively. This seemingly insignificant realisation has been my guiding light throughout the years, and it certainly smoothened my path when I failed terribly, and reminded me of where I started.

While I gear up for a new stage of my life – to live and study in another continent far away from home, I look back on my past with a smile. Things do change, but it is up to you to drive your destiny – you can always carve out your eventual journey.

*Things do change, but it is up to you to drive
your destiny – you can always carve out
your eventual journey.*



The Grass this Side? Just as Green

Grace Lim Jia Wei, 26, is still young at heart and is pursuing her first love, a Masters in Arts (English Literature).

Winner of the Subject Prize for her programme, she graduated top of her class and is currently lecturing in Methodist College, Kuala Lumpur with her sight set on a PhD.

Having grown up in a very stable environment with great friends, I had my life planned out for me. I did well in my SPM, took Form Six and got into the University of Malaya (UM) to do a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme. I was very focused on my ambition to be a teacher, so the route I took seemed to be the only logical step for me. Only public universities offered a Degree in Education and I could only enter the aforementioned public universities with Form Six results.

Into the second year of my university life, I began to question myself. Did I make the right choice? I began to envy my friends who had taken the less-travelled route. Many obtained scholarships to study overseas, which I did not apply for because I was convinced I had to do my course within Malaysia. I told myself I did not need it, and though there was some satisfaction in saying that I left the scholarships to more deserving individuals, it began to hurt. My false perception of reality was finally shattered when I discovered that I could have pursued the same course overseas with scholarships from the government. I was so blinded and contented with my dream of getting into UM that I did

not bother finding out about other options to pursue education as a career.

I soon realised that I was hankering after the glamour of studying overseas, of being able to proudly say that I studied in the US, the UK, or other seemingly 'more established' education hubs. It took me a while to understand that although I was stuck in Malaysia until I graduate, I could still go overseas in the future. It was not the end of the road for me; in fact, it was only the beginning.

I found that being in a public university was not all that bad. Unlike those who condemn the quality of education in Malaysia and do not give it a second thought, I can attest from first-hand experience that there are positives in completing studies locally. Being a family-oriented individual, I was closer to home, and it truly helped me to progress from a carefree teenager to an independent young adult; I was so blessed to be able to call my mum when I needed to talk. In addition, studying locally was also very kind on my parents' piggy bank. I can say with some degree of certainty that my lecturers were not all that bad, for I was lucky to have the opportunity to learn from some experienced lecturers.

In my third year of university, I learnt the most valuable lesson of all. Incidentally, that lesson was not taught in a classroom. I discovered that I could still have my 'international' experience while studying locally. I was one of four undergraduates chosen to represent Malaysia in the 8th Hitachi Young Leaders Initiative (HYLI). Participants of the one week-programme, themed 'Empowering Asia: An Increased Role and a Common Voice as a Responsible Player', had to discuss and come up with solutions for regional problems. Discussions were intellectual, occasionally heated, but always professional. The organisers also gave us opportunities to experience the local Vietnamese culture. One of my fondest memories is shopping for an *ao dai*, a traditional Vietnamese dress, in the streets of Hanoi and all 28 of us having a crazy karaoke session until three in the morning.

That one week in contact with other amazing undergraduates from all over Asia was an eye-opener, and I was truly inspired. Before HYLI, my world consisted of my home, my university, and my church. After HYLI, the walls of

my world were blown wide open; I stepped into a whole new paradigm where I learnt that every individual, myself included, can lead and produce change.

If I had this mindset when I began my higher education, I would have been able to branch out and explore more, to seek and seize opportunities, and not just wait for them to come my way. Fuelled with the realisation that I did not have to be stuck in Malaysia, I sought out opportunities that would allow me to experience different cultures. Participating in international programmes and making friends with foreigners who came here to study in those four years of education expanded my worldview, and it happened right here in Malaysia.

Even if you do not procure prestigious scholarships or admittance into renowned universities overseas, it is not the end of the world. The testing ground to prove yourself begins after your education, and thanks to the great education I received locally, I am confident that I stand a great chance at succeeding in the future.

*I stepped into a whole new paradigm where
I learnt that every individual, myself included,
could lead and produce change.*



Chasing Dreams

Grace Ong Doen En, 20, loves pink on everything but her clothes. After completing SPM at SMK Convent Bukit Nanas, she enrolled in CIMP at Sunway College. Originally a physics devotee, her bad sense of direction led her down a different path to NYU, where she majored in film before trotting off to the Berklee College of Music.

By the year 2006, I was in my second semester of the Canadian International Matriculation Programme at Sunway University College and I still did not have a final, definite answer for the question, “What am I going to do in college?”

My actual story is much longer, but I will just start from right before I graduated from Sunway. I decided to switch to studying film because it was the only major that comprised everything I was interested in – photography, animation, fashion design, physics, music, and writing. And being the ambitious person that I was, I applied to Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and got admitted.

By the end of my freshman year, however, I was not so sure that I had made the right decision. Music was more my ‘thing’. Sometime in the middle of my sophomore fall semester, I decided that it was time I made another switch. This time, I applied to Berklee College of Music. Again, I was admitted.

You know how people say things like, “I wanted to do this but could not because my parents said no,” or “I am not like you, I cannot do this and that

because I am poor”?

Well, I believe I ran into the same roadblocks as many others did, but I have no sob stories to tell. My parents are paying my way entirely, but I also did my homework searching for possible funding alternatives. Unfortunately, the relevant authorities were not as helpful as I had hoped. I mean no ill will, but while I am glad that a lot of youths these days are opting for more artsy majors, I am also sad that many others lack the fighting spirit to push for their dreams until they exhaust every possible means of fulfilling them, even if it means defying your parents – just not to the extent of ending up homeless.

I know the mental exhaustion one gets from majoring in fine arts. You do not wreck your brain trying to solve calculus questions (though you might, over optics, if you are doing film); rather, you drain your soul trying to keep up with all the ‘gung-ho’ youths around you. In Tisch, it felt like everyone had seen every single film there was to see, and if you wanted to fit in, you had to be a huge film buff and talk film 24/7. If you did not, people would give you the cold shoulder. The place was *that* elitist.

That brings me back to the importance of a strong fighting spirit. Pursuing fine arts does not promise you a stable job or a steady income. The fine arts department is filled with people who have vowed to devote their life to a career that may not even produce enough for them to get by. Doing something you love is, on its own, a very fulfilling thing, but the question I had to ask myself (which you too *should* ask yourself, should you choose to delve into fine arts) is: “Do I love it enough?”

And along the path leading to that dreaded question are a series of little turn-offs, sort of like side quests, that a lot of you might avoid so they do not get in the way of your ‘great dream’.

I say take the turn-off, and follow it to see where it goes. For I would never have enrolled in art school if I did not think I was a gifted artist, but I would never have known that I was a gifted artist if I had not improvised songs that I learnt by ear, or drew random people by basing them off existing cartoon characters. And I would never have begun trying to play by ear or drawing cartoon characters if I had not watched Sailor Moon and wanted to play the

opening theme song on the piano, or draw the Sailor Senshi so I could paste their pictures on my bedroom wall.

Thus, given the endless possibilities, you have nothing to lose, except perhaps a little time. You'll never know who or what you might find that might inspire or motivate you, or aid you in your career. Go out and explore!

*I say take the turn-off, and follow it
to see where it goes.*

NOT FOR SALE



The Upside of Unlucky

Ho Mei Kay, 21, is an Economics major at Stanford University whose recruitment into National Service probably saved her from being an unhappy and unsuitable medical student.

I was horrified when I learnt I had been picked for National Service. I stared long and hard at that awful word, ‘*Tahmiab!*’, hoping it would go away. Being the only one in my class to be chosen, I considered myself incredibly unlucky.

Yet, this chance selection turned out to be one of the best things that has happened to me. Not so much for the experience itself (which in fact was very memorable), but for my subsequent decision to begin A-levels half a year later, taking the July route instead of January like all my other friends.

Being an impatient person, I was initially quite reluctant at having to start in July, for it meant that I could only apply to universities a year later than everyone else. But what I failed to see then was that I had not decided what I wanted to do after SPM anyway. I only had a vague idea of becoming a doctor, perhaps. Upon soul-searching and speaking to people in the field, I realised that I did not have the passion required to make it in the medical profession. Thus, going to Sarawak for National Service was a stroke of luck that probably saved me from being an unhappy and unsuitable medical student.

When July came, I was more energised than ever to start college after six long months of holidays. Another blessing was that I had more time for extracurricular activities before I left for university. My best friend and I joined

Amnesty International, a human rights organisation, after reading about their work in the local papers. A whirlwind adventure for us began, learning about issues I was previously unaware of, and traveling to little-known pockets of the country to visit *Orang Asli* villages.

Eventually, we started our own human rights society in college, a scary idea at the time as I was secretly still uncertain about my leadership capabilities. We also had no money and no members, save the few unfortunate classmates we forced to join us. However, we took a chance and began fundraising by selling human rights-themed bookmarks. Nobody really read books in college, but we raised a whopping amount anyway, thanks to the aggressive tactics of our dedicated new members. Step-by-step, the club continued to grow. We had some big successes, little victories, and also embarrassing failures. The experience of bruising and picking myself up taught me more than my textbooks ever could, for I soon found myself quite adept at leadership, while the little successes that we achieved spurred me to take on more ambitious goals.

Along the way, I was also fortunate to meet some fascinating young people from very diverse backgrounds – some were studying to be lawyers and psychologists, while others were already filmmakers and talented young actors. At a human rights youth conference in Hong Kong, I met young activists from the Asian Pacific region, and later had the opportunity to work with some of them on joint projects. One such project was making a short human rights film, which allowed me to go behind the scenes of movie making and learnt a whole new bag of tricks. All in all, it was a truly enriching experience.

However, juggling A-levels with all my other activities was tricky at times, and I had to be careful not to slack off at college. It often meant giving up a few social events, but I was never much of a party girl anyway.

By the end of 2008, it was finally time to apply to universities. Initially, the American process seemed so ridiculously complicated that I nearly passed it up. After overcoming my initial confusion, I actually came to like writing essays for my application – they forced me to dig deep and examine my past experiences. So I dug and I dug, turning over every single event in my life to discover the one

thing that would set me apart. At last, I decided to write about my upbringing and how it led to my interest in human rights. And so along with my SAT scores, secondary school grades, and letters of recommendation, I nervously sealed off my hopes and dreams in a little brown envelope to America.

One groggy morning some months later, I awoke to find an email from Stanford. I remember how furiously my heart pulsed as I clicked it open, and waited.

I screamed, waking the neighbours. I had been accepted.

For a long time it felt surreal knowing I had gotten into the school of my dreams, but I also knew it would not have been possible without taking a semi-gap year to figure myself out. The word “*Tahniah!*”, turned out to be quite right after all.

*The experience of bruising and picking myself up
taught me more than my textbooks ever could.*



Who are You?

Hiu Chii Fen, 20, is a former student of Cempaka Group of Schools. She is currently stressing out about her final examinations at HELP Academy and will hopefully be flying to the United Kingdom as a student of the University of York in September 2009. Fingers crossed!

Hey you! I am Chii Fen. Let me tell you a little about who I am.

I juggle multiple important tasks such as Facebook-ing, texting, You-tubing, and my newest craze, Twitter-ing. I have A-levels finals in seven days but have yet to make a dent in my books. I have also finally gotten around to writing this article, about half an hour past the deadline.

Would you like to be me?

More importantly, who are you?

At this moment you are probably asking yourself: “What should I do after SPM?” The answer to that question greatly depends on who you are.

Many of us tend to carry around a mindset of “Where?” as we progress in life. For example: “Hi, my name is Maria. I am from Sekolah Sri KDU. I am currently studying at HELP University College and I would like to further my studies at Manchester University.”

Many of us also think and converse in terms of “What”, i.e. “What we have done, what we are doing, and what we want to do”. For example: “Hi, my name is Sophia. I graduated with 9 A’s and 1 B in SPM, I am currently

taking the Cambridge A-levels, and I would like to study Engineering.”

These days, we tend to define ourselves by what we have done and where we come from, when in actuality, our achievements and background are merely subsets of the universal question of who we are.

Here are the three questions you should really ask yourself after SPM:

“Who was I? Who am I? Who do I want to be?”

It is essential to seriously reflect upon what type of student you are, what your passions are, what you are good at, what you want to improve on, and who you want to be ten years down the road. Do not just go where your friends go, or do what they do. Do not do what your parents tell you unless you have given thought to who you want to be in life. Only by knowing yourself can you surpass the barriers of what you did or did not do, or where you are from.

This is one of the most pivotal moments in your life, and I urge you to give credit where it is due. Many of us find ourselves stuck doing something we do not enjoy or drop out mid-course because we finally realise we desire something different. In both cases a lot of money and time is wasted, and with it, I am sure a lot of regret is accumulated.

Dos and Don'ts for life after SPM:

Do

1. **Party.** After two years, 20 months, and 700 days of stressing out over exams, I think you deserve a few weeks' break. Spend time with your friends who are leaving the country, take trips, and enjoy being carefree, because your freedom is not going to last for very long.
2. **Buckle down.** Now that you have partied away your need for partying (and it is important that you do), it is time to decide what you want to do with your life and who you want to be. Research pre-university courses and universities you are interested in. Find out which university offers the most recognised degree in the area you wish to pursue and take your family's financial situation into consideration. If you are unable to afford further education, search for scholarships. You can also take a year off to work and save for education.

3. **Apply for university.** You would be surprised at the number of my friends who missed their university application deadlines. Ensure you are in the loop with the dates for applications; pay attention to your college notices.

Don't

1. **Procrastinate.** This is my biggest warning for life after SPM! Actually, it is my only warning, and it applies to life in general. I can safely say I spend half my time sleeping, often to avoid doing work. When you have an assignment to finish; yes, you are awake enough to do it, no, you do not have to watch *Heroes*, and no, you will not have enough time tomorrow!

I am a year older than most of you, but I am no wiser or cleverer than any of you. I do, however, have the benefit of hindsight. Back then, I told everyone I was a student at Sri Cempaka, I did pretty awesome for SPM, I was attending HELP Academy, and I wanted to study in the UK. But now I know:

I was an involved and passionate student.

I am a procrastinator.

I will spend my life doing a job I am passionate about.

Who are you?

*Only by knowing yourself can you surpass
the barriers of what you did or did not do,
or where you are from.*



Postcard from Singapore

Ho Yi Jian, 24, graduated with Honours in Political Science from the National University of Singapore after spending two years in a bizarre alternate dimension called junior college. He deludes himself by thinking that he understands Singaporeans. He occasionally writes for the Kent Ridge Common website on Malaysia, Singapore, and campus issues.

In their continuous search for talent, the Singaporean government hands out the ASEAN Pre-University and Undergraduate scholarship, of which I am a recipient. Thousands of Malaysians apply, but only two to four hundred get selected every year. I personally do not think the ASEAN Scholarship is very prestigious, but the average Singaporean you meet will make it to be quite an achievement.

I did not choose this path for myself. One day, my mum showed me an advertisement about this ASEAN scholarship in the local newspaper and encouraged me to apply. I was lucky to qualify for the exams, and surprisingly, I was the person they were looking for. After two years of pre-university studies, I continued on to the National University of Singapore.

Let me dispel the notion that Singapore and Malaysia have similar cultures. We are different; there are no two ways about it. They do not learn our national Malay language; they have pulled ahead of us in terms of GDP per capita years ago, and physical development by the government is literally everywhere.

They have no *kampung*s and no roadside *mamaks*. We will never understand National Service the way they do, and do not get me started on politics – it is not as perky as it is portrayed to be, but that is just a Political Science student speaking.

People will praise the public transport, the cleanliness, the tall buildings, and the ornaments on Orchard Road; but really, the first thing you will notice in Singapore is its sidewalks. There are sidewalks everywhere. The next thing you will notice is traffic. In Malaysia, you always wait for cars to clear before crossing. In orderly Singapore, cars wait for you! It is as if drivers in Singapore just got out of driving school. They have funny zigzag road markings at turnings, and the cars drive out to the middle of crossroads before turning. They also have double-decker buses that are an absolute delight to ride for the first time.

But nothing can compare to the most mind-blowing school culture that has evolved in Singapore: orientation. In Malaysia, orientation is one and a half days of walking around campus and maybe getting to know your seniors and potential classmates. Orientation in a Singaporean Junior College is several days of crazy games, mass dances, rehearsed cheering, and forced socialisation.

You will get to know the quirks of Singaporean life such as the Total Defence Day, where they blare the sirens in remembrance of the Japanese invasion. There is Racial Harmony Day, which is an excuse to not wear the uniform. You will have to celebrate National Day with them – do you play along and wear their national colours, or are you going to feel vaguely traitorous?

Oh, and everybody wears their secondary school uniforms for the first three months of Junior College. You will see the most outrageous school uniform variations they have here. Some girl schools in Singapore have sleeveless uniforms – absolute blasphemy in Malaysia! If you are lucky, you will get a Junior College with a nice uniform colour. Unfortunately, I have heard that the latest educational reform abandoned this policy, so you will be buying your Junior College uniform as soon as you get in.

If you are not an athlete, you will either learn to love physical education or hate it. Junior Colleges have the duty of getting their young men fit for

National Service, so you will be included with the Singaporeans if you are a guy. If you are a girl, you get away with a slightly reduced regiment.

Most of us who came in January (at the beginning of the school year) were on a provisional scholarship pending our SPM results. Some of the provisional scholars quit because they could not handle the stress and the pace of life away from home. Maybe it is them, maybe it is Singapore. People have their own reasons, and you will have to make the decision to stay. There are always going to be people who drop out, but if you can keep your chin up and put up a good fight, you are not alone. The teachers here are generally caring, and your classmates will help you if they can.

Many of my friends and seniors have found a good life; whether or not they use Singapore as a stepping stone to Cambridge, Oxford, or any other respected institution of higher learning is another matter altogether, but if you stay in Singapore to pursue education at university level, you are locked in because there is a three-year contractual obligation to work in Singapore. Many are offered Permanent Residency (PR) and end up marrying Singaporeans. Whether or not you feel that is the right thing to do, it is a decision you will have to make for yourself.

*There are always going to be people who drop out,
but if you can keep your chin up and put up a
good fight, you are not alone.*



Failure is Not the End

Jasmine Yow, 21, dreams of becoming a dancer.

After acing SPM at SMJK Keat Hwa, she did her A-levels at National Junior College, Singapore, under the ASEAN scholarship in 2006. She is now majoring in journalism at Taylor's University, Petaling Jaya.

I used to be an outstanding student. My dad tells me that the noodle hawker back in my hometown, Alor Setar, still asks about me. He remembers my achievements that were published in the newspapers when I was nine years old. At that time, I was ambitious, determined, and hardworking. Most of all, I was happy.

In secondary school, I participated in many national competitions; I was involved in everything from debating to drama, and from first aid to representing Malaysia at the International Mathematics Olympiad in Greece. But somewhere along the way, I lost all of my eagerness to learn. I became angry and disillusioned with the school system because I felt like I was coerced to participate in competitions without knowing what benefit came from it all. I wanted to get away from Malaysia as soon as I could.

Then I learnt about the ASEAN scholarship through the newspapers. As the eldest of three siblings, I felt that I was expected to get a scholarship, so I applied. I was also attracted by the prospect of studying in Singapore, which is renowned for its quality education.

However, the ASEAN Pre-University Scholarship did not cover university tuition fees. Hence, after getting 10A1's and 2A2's for my SPM, I applied for the PSD medical scholarship as well. Although I was not really passionate about becoming a doctor, my experience in St. John's Ambulance did spark some interest. Nevertheless, I was not awarded the scholarship.

Junior college was an incredibly challenging and eye-opening experience, and I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to interact with so many talented people. I got to pursue vastly different things: from camping in temperatures of -20°C during Outward Bound Korea, tutoring a partially mute girl at a community service centre, to learning how to scuba dive. Alas, for all my achievements, I was not emotionally prepared to handle competition or failure. Although I still topped my class at the end of my first year of junior college, I kept falling into bouts of depression due to the pressure cooker environment. By the end of my second year, I was excused from all lessons. I barely passed my A-levels.

I returned to Malaysia feeling defeated and lost. From being a top student, I became the last in the entire cohort (seriously). My dreams of studying psychology at Harvard or Yale were all but shattered. For half a year, I did almost nothing other than teach a few tuition classes at home.

By June 2008, I decided that I would not continue my purposeless existence any longer. Since I could not gain admission into universities in Singapore, I looked up our local colleges. After much research, I finally found a reputable college with a course I could get into, based on my interest and very poor grades.

I am now beginning my second year at Taylor's University after passing my first year with flying colours. I marvel at how God, family, and friends have helped me change so much. True; I am no longer on scholarship, no longer a star student, but I am fulfilled. I have the freedom to learn as much as I can and want to, not just from books and lectures, but also from discovering my talents and passions through various means. I have come to realise that the world I constructed for myself is so small – there are gross crises existing in the world today that need us, need me, to take action! When I view life as a

chance to use my God-given abilities to do something about these problems, instead of a race for never-ending achievements, I have a renewed desire to excel again. For instance, in November 2009, I published a book entitled *Behind That Shiny Resume* with Armour Publishing, Singapore, to share my story of hope with people, and I am glad it has been an inspiration to many.

So, do I then conclude that Malaysia has a more conducive environment for students as compared to Singapore? Not really. While studying in your own *tanah air* has its own comforts, I believe that the opportunity to study abroad provides many benefits. Without my experience in Singapore, I would not have realised how much I had to learn in terms of managing stress and negative emotions. In the future, I might consider doing a Master's degree in the States. But for now, I am embracing a life of Manglish and *mamak*-ing with pleasure.

Thus, growing up with success as your constant companion may cause failure to become difficult to swallow. But rest assured; failure is not the end of everything. I, for one, know that I still have much to look forward to in the future. Do not always worry about your grades, for life has so much more to offer.

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Much Ado about Film

Jonathan Wong, 33, is a filmmaking maverick and creative director of two media agencies, Vertica 7 Integrated Media and Luminous Force Pictures. His unquenchable thirst for life is manifested through his passion to make films. Films that will test the boundaries of creativity, while allowing the content – especially the story – to challenge our perception of humanity.

In school, I felt like an ostrich whose neck was tied into a knot. It was suffocating. I was an arts student stuck in a science class, which was most unfortunate for someone whose childhood dreams were to create alien invasions, nuclear warfare, and epic prehistoric battles between cavemen and dinosaurs. There was an array of stories in my head waiting to be projected onto a white screen, for I wanted to be a filmmaker.

After leaving secondary school, away from the regimented lifestyle of timetable academics, I opened my eyes to observe the way society functions. The complexity of relationships, the stigmatism of social conformity, and the deceitfulness of human politics started to worm their way into my subconscious. I began to see things I never did back in school. I was enlightened, and my observations began to fuel my imagination to a greater degree.

I spent one year in Sunway College doing my Australian Matriculation Programme and proceeded soon after to Limkokwing Institute of Technology to do my foundation in Design studies. I had a burning desire to do Mass

Communications the following year, but I was pressured into making a decision that would benefit my career in the long run, so to speak. Having continuously being advised that the path of security is the most logical choice, I decided to take up Industrial Design studies, a more financially sustainable route compared to being a filmmaker.

The realisation that there was more to life than academics also became my core philosophy during college years. Having met one too many eccentric characters in college, such as a classmate who wore scuba-diving gear to lectures, I felt rejuvenated whenever I start weaving together fragments of my daily encounters into stories. The diversity I saw in life must not be contained, but released and expressed. Deep down, I knew I still needed to fulfill my filmmaking aspirations. To be weighed down by material pursuits and everyday chores would be the greatest impediment to my passion.

After leaving Limkokwing, I went against the grain and enrolled myself in a film production course. TV3 Academy was where my filmmaking adventures started. I made my first 12 minutes short film called 'Communicate', which was about the very last moments of a girl before she took her own life. With multiple flashbacks and prickly subject matter, I swore some lecturers almost fell off their seats when they reviewed the film. During production, I myself almost fell off the windowsill on the 15th floor of the apartment building while trying to demonstrate to the main actress the actions of her suicidal character. Thank God – He decided it was not time for me to go, as I managed to hold on to a panel after having slipped from an unkempt bed by the open window.

With my extended lifetime, and upon graduation from the academy, I went on to direct several video ads for NGOs. My foray into making corporate videos was the catalyst to my setting up a media agency called Vertica 7. Henceforth, while juggling both profit-making commercial projects and short films, I directed 'The Search for Paradise', 'Synapse', '.Noir' and 'I Am Afreeka'. 'The Search for Paradise' depicted young orphans trying to come to terms with their shortcomings, while 'Synapse', made two years later, was a sci-fi drama about a kidnapper who, after losing his subject, finds himself in a parallel

universe when he walked out of his hotel room door.

2008's '*Noir*' explored the psyche of two screenwriters while they were writing a script for a movie; they engaged in a homicidal act just to relate to the characters in their film. A long distance, interracial relationship between a Nigerian man and a Malaysian girl became the main theme of 2009's '*I Am Afreeka*'. It was inspired by the amalgamation of cultures and the breaking down of racial stereotypes prevalent in our current generation. I will never limit myself to making films just within the context of my own country and race, for that will prove to be fatally shortsighted in the long run.

I must admit that it is difficult to survive solely by making films. With my contempt for the '9 to 5' lifestyle, challenges abound when one does not fit into the social archetype of either a blue or white collared worker. But today, 5 short films and many extraordinary life lessons later, I am still in the pursuit of becoming a full-fledged film director while running a media agency on the sidelines.

Carpe diem. Seize the day and do not let your dreams be washed away – as for me, I will write more after I win my Oscar.

I will never limit myself to making films just within the context of my own country and race, for that will prove to be fatally shortsighted in the long run.



The 'Hypocritic' Oath

Jonitha Nadarajah, 25, is a medical student in International Medical University (IMU), Malaysia who hopes to graduate in 2010 before selling her soul to the Ministry of Health in return for gruelling underpaid labour. She also vows not to accidentally kill any patients.

It is an old joke in the medical field – more often than not, the Hippocratic Oath eventually becomes the 'Hypocritic' Oath.

It all starts at the medical school interview, with the standard question being “Why do you want to do medicine?” We then take a deep breath, flash our most confident smile, and regurgitate the well-rehearsed lines that we have practiced oh-so-many times.

What baffles me is why would anyone want to submit themselves to five years of torture, with the guarantee of stress induced by the monthly assessments that always come too soon. There is also no telling what sort of patient would be assigned to you. It does not matter if you do not speak the language – you are still somehow required to present an intelligent case about the assigned patient and conduct a discussion worthy of the lecturer's time. If you fail at any of the above, rest assured that when the results bar graph comes out three weeks later, you would be the reason for the far right end of the bell-shaped curve.

The variety of ways that the medical curriculum has been structured to

test students also fascinates me. Besides the case presentations earlier on, there are also other modes of examining devices such as multiple choice questions, structured answer questions, BCQ, MEQ, OSPE, OSCE – even I do not know what they stand for! With the constant need for adrenaline, I would not be surprised if our adrenal glands have somewhat atrophied due to overuse compared to the general population.

We rotate over the ten odd departments that make up the study of medicine in the second part of the five-year programme, and some we enter with more gusto than others. I remember that my first clinical exposure was to the department of surgery, followed by medicine and family medicine. I completed my psychiatry, orthopaedics, paediatrics, and obstetrics postings during my following semester. Each study of medicine mentioned above has a 500-page textbook as the recommended text. More often than not though, most of us make a beeline for the 'Medicine Made Easy' series.

Psychiatric wards can be scary and a riot at the same time. Some patients talk a mile a minute, while others walk a mile a minute up and down the wards. We had an 'Alien vs. Predator' moment between two patients that required the nurse to jab them both with sedative drugs, while we medical students watched in fascinated fright behind the protected glass windows.

Semester 8, also called the 'honeymoon semester' due to its lack of major exams (the minor tests still exist, mind you), starts off with two months of electives and selectives, followed by a short repeat of orthopaedics, psychiatry, and family medicine. Next comes a barrage of short two-week 'minor postings', which make up the more specialised fields of ophthalmology, dermatology, ear, nose and throat, and emergency medicine. Wielding an ophthalmoscope, standing cheek to cheek in front of the patient and peering into his eye, straining to see something – anything – can break the will of many. But nay, we are told that practice makes perfect, so off we go seeking another dilated pupil to repeat the exercise.

Ah, but it is only the calm before the storm – Semester 9 is an absolute killer. If the short four-week hectic postings of internal medicine, surgery, gynaecology and paediatrics, anaesthesiology and radiology are not enough to

drive you mad, then the ultra-short study break of 2 weeks before you sit for a major exam definitely will. The final semester, the last lap before you reach the golden gates of graduation, requires you to shadow the house officers in a small, secluded hospital. That basically summarises the curriculum for the clinical years of medicine. The first two and a half years were absolute bliss compared to this, as we only had to attend daily two-hour lectures and the occasional added clinical sessions. And then off to the mall we would go, heels clicking, to do the things that KL-lites do.

And yet, after all the exams, toil, blood, sweat and tears, medicine is worth it. The same ideals that we had set out with are still buried deep inside us. So on graduation day, when we say the Hippocratic Oath, we do not think about what we have sacrificed or will be sacrificing. I think our thoughts will be along the lines of what lies in store for us equipped with this Midas touch of healing.

We know that tremendous power is in our hands as we can prolong or shorten life, save a limb or chop it off, cure the patient from cancer, or cause them the sufferance of years of treatment if caught too late. And that, my friends, makes medicine worth it.

*We know that tremendous power is in our hands
as we can prolong or shorten life, save a limb or
chop it off, cure the patient from cancer, or
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Made for Music

Jude Jon Limus, 23, is Kadazan-Chinese.

Born and bred in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, he despises music that is dishonest, aesthetically apathetic, and music that purposefully sends ignominious, corrupt, and debasing messages. Jude just wrote and performed his first Mandarin song.

I have always been interested in music. Since I was young, I started playing the keyboard and took various classes to improve myself. I also picked up the drums and electric guitar along the way.

After SPM, I took a three-month hiatus before working part-time in a music production shop for another three months. I cleaned toilets, helped in recording, and became a receptionist for the shop. In a nutshell, I became a slave simply to expose myself to the world of music production.

In July 2006, I began college at Asian Tourism Institute, majoring in a two and half year Tourism and Business course. During this time, my passion for music never changed. I continued taking classes and playing; time, effort, and money was invested to buy and maintain my musical instruments.

Towards the end of college, I felt that tourism was not exactly my thing. This conviction became stronger during my internship, which was my last assignment after my final exams. It was then that I decided tourism would not be my focus in life. I did not like it very much, and I chose to study it without any clear reason in the first place.

My turning point came in August 2007, when a band called 1 a.m. from Eaglepoint, Kuala Lumpur, came to my hometown to hold a concert. I had kept in touch with them since I attended their music workshop in Kota Kinabalu in 2001. This time, they asked me to consider joining their band as a full-time musician since their electric guitarist was leaving for Australia to continue his studies in Medicine.

I prayed and fasted, thinking long and hard about this. See, playing the electric guitar was not one of my strengths; I was a drummer and keyboardist by trade. But in November 2007, I accepted their offer and my journey with 1 a.m. began.

I practiced as hard as my hands and brain could handle in order to reach a respectable level of musicianship on the electric guitar. We played at concerts in Malaysia and outside Malaysia, such as the Philippines; 1 a.m. was bringing their music internationally to Dubai and New Zealand even before I came on board.

However, being a musician is not about playing music the entire day. I teach the keyboard, drums, and guitar as well. As the Academy Manager for One Accord Sdn. Bhd., I am responsible for monitoring our music students' progress, keeping the accounts, and making sure everything is running smoothly. I am also in charge of the in-house sales of 1 a.m. in Eaglepoint, my church. Besides that, I also oversee the Chinese worship band.

Currently, we are preparing for our biggest-ever tour yet: a nationwide tour called Change Your World, which is expected to impact 10,000 young people. Change Your World is a journey that will go from city to city to rally and encourage those aged 15 to 25 to own and love their cities and nation. The main issues we want to highlight are human trafficking, modern slavery, and illegal treatment of refugees.

We are also launching our album called Change in August 2009, and the music video for our single, 'Crooked', will be available soon. Recording this album was tough – I remember one particular week where all our ideas ran dry despite experimenting with different sounds and ideas into the wee hours of the morning. We were fatigued, frustrated with our faulty equipment, and

fumbled as we faced a dearth of inspiration. Thankfully, we pulled through by God's grace, and got it done with amazing results. There is so much to look forward to, and we are very excited for more things to come!

I am living my dream working as a full-time musician, for my career is my passion, and my passion is my career. Considerable pressure comes with the joy of performing, but everything is worth it when you are on stage ripping up a solo, hearing your band play their instruments in perfect symphony, headbanging to a fantastic tune, and watching the crowd do the same. More than doing something I like, I am able to be passionate about it and give my best. The music I play has a message, a purpose, and a recipient, all for the glory of my God whom I serve. He is the reason I play music in the first place.

I was given an opportunity to pursue what my heart was passionate about because I was diligent in taking time and effort to hone my God-given talent. So if you have a dream, make sure you are at your best to give your best, and improve to be better than the rest. That way, not only will opportunities always knock on your door – you will always be ready to answer their call.

*That way, not only will opportunities always knock
on your door – you will always be ready to
answer their call.*



Culinary Craving

Julian Noel Baptist, 20, is a student at Taylor's University School of Hospitality and Tourism. He holds a Diploma in Culinary Arts and is currently pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management from the University of Toulouse, France. He enjoys spending time with his family and two dogs and aspires to own a chain of quaint and cosy cafes inspired by the street cafes of Paris, where he will one day be.

The day I started thinking about my future was the day I completed my PMR, because that was when I thought I could decide which stream I would hop into. Sadly, having achieved seven A's for the PMR examinations, the weakness in the education system saw it fit to place me in the Science stream despite my absolute lack of interest in any of the subjects. Although I felt that I would have enjoyed the Arts stream more, it was considered an option for weaker students. Nevertheless, I took it in my stride, hoping that I could overcome whatever challenges that came my way.

Sadly, that did not materialise, and I ended up so lost and aimless in the entire mayhem of Science and Math that I just stopped taking it seriously. I skipped school constantly, ignored my studies, and slacked off throughout the rest of my year. Sad but true; this is what a total lack of interest did to me.

I took my SPM and graduated with less-than-flying colours, but my results were enough for me to enter college. Armed with the very few A's I had,

I tried scouting for what I was to be. I was lost at first, and looked into Mass Communications, Law, and Languages, among others. I spent seven months at home after my SPM thinking of what I could do (something different) and what I could not do (something mundane). And one day, just as I had the craving for a deep dark chocolate cake with butter icing, I suddenly knew what I was going to do. I called up the colleges that offered this course and enquired about everything from the fees to the curriculum. By then, I knew that I wanted to take Culinary Arts.

Contrary to popular belief, this course is not all about cooking and baking; at least, not where I am studying. There is actually a lot more to the world of Culinary Arts as we also learn Business Mathematics, Cost Accounting, Food Science, Entrepreneurship, and Law. The curriculum includes many subjects that I would never have associated with the world of Culinary Arts, but all of which I am glad to have learnt. In this field, people tend to think that years of experience always outweigh the smartest of individuals, which is true to a certain extent.

However, as time brings about changes, we too have to adapt to them. Individuals who believe that being older is the alpha and omega must be aware of the younger generation's capabilities as we can bring a breath of fresh air to this industry.

Many think that cooking is no rocket science and studying such a field seems redundant or even silly, but this is completely untrue as cooking is not easy. With innovations in science and technology, cooking is no longer confined to just cooking with a pot and a pan over a stove or in an oven. Newer scientific methods of cooking through Molecular Gastronomy and scientific methods of precise temperature cooking through Sous Vide cooking has also shaped this field and industry into becoming one that moves along with the times and is bursting with potential. If you do not believe me, try looking up Culinology, the science of cuisine.

I think the entire idea of me being in a cooking course at 18 after spending my secondary school days lost in the world of scary anatomical parts and chemical equations is very profound and incredible. I think this goes to show

that being miserable and lost as a result of a rigid education system does not necessarily mean the end for all of us. With the right determination and inspiration, you can definitely go further. The process does not stop if you fail to get 20A's or 10A's or 5A's – life goes on, and it is up to you to succeed because you shape your own future, not the education system or its perceived flaws.

And true enough, fast forward two years later, my diploma course has ended and I emerged the top student for that particular intake of the Culinary Arts batch. It was especially amazing for me, seeing how I thought that my poor performance in the SPM examinations spelled the end for me – instead, it opened up an entire new world of success, one that I personally enjoy and look forward to making a career out of.

Individuals who believe that being older is the alpha and omega must be aware of the younger generation's capabilities as we can bring a breath of fresh air to this industry.



20 Hours Away from Home

Karuna Ang, 20, has a name that never fails to draw attention due to its Indian origins and her Chinese heritage.

She believes that her dreams are all that matter, and is interested in photography and architecture. Though the culture shock hit her hard when she first arrived in the United States, she forges on in her pursuit of Journalism and Mass Communication, with a focus on Public Relations, at Iowa State University.

Do you know that sort of moment when you feel like you really need to take a certain path because it feels right? At that time, your rationality fails you, and the wise words of your parents or relatives would just flow through the passages of your mind as nothing more than empty sounds. My parents told me to opt for a more professional field for a better future, but I insisted on doing what I wanted to do.

But how did I arrive at INTI University College in Nilai just three weeks after SPM? The truth is, I went there because my crush was there, but that is a story for another day. I did not blindly follow him there though; I did my own research and found out that INTI is actually well-known for its American University Programme. I had earlier decided to go against my parents' wishes to pursue my heart's desire: a degree in the field of Journalism and Mass Communication. I also felt that I needed to see and know more of the world, and yearned to experience a different culture, a different way of life. Thus,

after completing my core subjects in INTI, off I went to Iowa!

“Why did you come to Iowa?” is a question I often get. After taking a lot of factors into consideration, including financial support from my parents, I would say Iowa State University (ISU) was one of my top choices to pursue my degree. I learnt from USnews.com that ISU, which is a Tier 1 school, ranks within the top 100 of all National Universities in America. Also, the Iowa State Daily (ISD), which is the in-house student publication, was named the nation’s best student newspaper by The Society of Professional Journalists last year.

In Spring 2008, ISD earned a Gold Crown award from the Columbia Scholastic Press Association (owned by Columbia University). Among the staff at the Greenlee School of Journalism is Pulitzer Prize winner Dennis Chamberlin, an assistant professor who instructs students on visual communication and photojournalism. I have yet to meet Mr. Chamberlin, but I am glad I made it to the ISD team as a photographer.

I have learnt so much more about photography since I joined the staff, as photographing events and people for a publication is vastly different from taking photographs for fun. Checking my work e-mail every morning and before I sleep is a must, as is logging on to the university’s event calendar everyday. I usually get a call from the photo editor a day or two before an event to determine whether I could cover it. Sometimes I get calls one hour before the event starts, but it comes with the job. I met a semi-professional photographer who said that when working for a newspaper, one must have a flexible time schedule.

After two months on the team, I am now allowed to go on assignments on my own. It takes a lot of time and patience to produce a good photo. After I am done with a shoot, I need to go back to the newsroom for the post-shooting process, which comprises tweaking the brightness and contrast of the photos, as well as cropping out unwanted parts. This process is extremely time-consuming, for I am also responsible for captioning the photos. Another thing that I enjoy immensely about being the paper’s photographer is the opportunity to meet new people every day. Among the interesting characters I have met is

a balloon artist who spent five hours reating a 10-foot tall SpongeBob balloon sculpture!

As much as I enjoy what I am doing, there are downs to accompany life's ups. I had some weird moments communicating with my colleagues and housemates due to cultural differences. They seemed cautious not to offend me, which lead to awkward moments. Our different backgrounds resulted in us not knowing how to react to one another. Also, one of the main obstacles I face as a photographer is adapting to different styles of photography. My friends commented that my photos were too formally styled, too "Malaysian", while those of my colleagues were more candid and natural. Live and learn, I suppose.

And here I am today in ISU enduring the cold weather and writing this story of self belief, in the hopes that it will encourage you and change your life in some meaningful way. Throughout my journey, I have learnt to believe in my dreams and myself; even though I am uncertain of the future, I am very satisfied with where I am today. Thus, when the path ahead is rough with obstacles, I push harder, knowing that the dream I dreamt awaits me.

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awaits me.*



Undertaking UWC

Khing Ju Li, 23, is currently pursuing a degree in International Relations and Visual Art in Brown University, after studying International Baccalaureate at Li Po Chun United World College, Hong Kong, and Methodist Girls School, Klang. She believes that education is the key to everything.

Like most Malaysians, I grew up with the acute knowledge of Malaysia's deeply flawed education system. By secondary school, I was quite familiar with my post-SPM alternatives: Form Six, or one of the private universities in Subang Jaya. I was lucky; I had the luxury of choice. However, I wanted to travel and broaden my horizons, so I applied for three scholarships to study abroad; Petronas and PSD, which were the only two government scholarships I knew of then, and the United World College (UWC) scholarship, which I knew about from a former teacher whose daughter was a recipient.

In the end, I was offered both the Petronas and UWC scholarship. When I was first offered the Petronas scholarship, I was overjoyed. It was a free ride through a foreign university, with a job guaranteed! I jumped at it immediately, even before I had gone for the PSD and UWC interviews. At that point, I had become complacent; my success with Petronas made the PSD scholarship seem less important, while the UWC scholarship was only offered for the International Baccalaureate programme, and recipients were bound for Hong Kong to boot. My perception of Hong Kong had been constructed from

childhood memories of 'Wong Fei Hung' movies and old photographs of boat people, not to mention the impression of people speaking in a foreign language. Nevertheless, my mother convinced me to give it a try.

Eventually, the UWC alumni (in other words, the interviewers) engaged other candidates and myself in the best and most intensive discussion ever. They talked to us candidly about their experiences. The more I heard, the more I became fascinated and thrilled by the idea of studying and staying in a foreign country together with people from almost every conceivable country in the world while attempting to survive the most rigorous lifestyle I could imagine! When the scholarship was offered to me, I accepted it with renewed enthusiasm. Upon arrival, I found Hong Kong to be far from the decrepit fishing village I had imagined, and as for Cantonese, it was never too late to relearn it. The fact that there was no bond attached to the UWC scholarship gave me the freedom to do whatever I wanted. I spent the best two years of my life in Hong Kong with people whom I still keep in touch with today, despite our subsequently different pathways in life.

Towards the end of life in UWC, I started thinking of university education again, and this time my choices seemed endless. Naturally, the idea of a US education was on everyone's mind due to the generous financial aid offered to international students, especially UWC graduates. I learnt by then that with the right amount of effort and confidence, nothing was too difficult. I also had a wide resource of feedbacks coming in from graduates who were studying in American universities. The prospect of studying subjects for the sake of gaining in-depth knowledge, and not just good grades, was a dream come true.

However, applying to college was easier said than done. My initial research delivered equally glowing reviews of every college. A friend who had earlier decided on Brown had gotten into it and was so excited – for weeks after, it was all she could talk about! At that point, one college was pretty much the same to me as the next, so I decided to apply to Brown as well. The subsequent application process added to my already busy life and took a toll on my studies, for I rarely managed my time well. There were definitely moments when I questioned my ability to maintain my composure, but I managed to pull

through with the support of friends who were going through the same ordeal, and teachers who had seen it all.

I am now in my second year at Brown University, and it has truly been the best choice I have ever made. My focus on International Relations and Visual Art is an odd combination, but living and conversing with people from different countries has broadened my perspective of the world and made me eager to learn more. In addition, a casual decision to take an introductory art course made me fall in love with art all over again – I now major in it to improve my own art with the guidance of experienced artists. My lecturers are a passionate lot; I have learnt much, but I have had to work for it.

Many have asked me (including myself) what a double degree in International Relations and Visual Art will lead to. I do not know, but I do not think that not knowing is a bad thing. My journey so far has been a series of coincidences. Life after Brown will probably be the same, and I would not have it any other way.

Many have asked me (including myself) what a double degree in International Relations and Visual Art will lead to. I do not know, but I do not think that not knowing is a bad thing.



Breaking the (Gender) Boundary in Bodybuilding

Kimberley Chai, 21, studied A-levels at Taylor's University while working as a freelance personal trainer and model at the same time. Her strong passion for the sport drove her to begin bodybuilding at the age of 15, and to pursue her dream of eventually opening her own gym.

I am not too different from most of you. Raised in a typical Chinese family, I am in most ways a regular girl who loves dressing up and putting on makeup, hanging out at shopping malls, and going to college. What set me apart, however, was a dream that most people would have deemed abnormal or insane for any typical girl.

As a child, pictures of people with muscular physiques easily fascinated me. I admired them and yearned to look like them someday. However, there were many obstacles and discouragements along the way. Above all, I was an overweight child who huffed and puffed even though I only tackled two flights of stairs. Needless to say, I was the butt of ridicule.

However, my parents finally gave me the green light to go to the gym once my PMR examinations were over. During that period, my weight problems were escalating and I was not feeling too encouraged. Everyone assumed that I just wanted to lose weight, but what I really wanted was to become

a bodybuilder. I was 15 when I first picked up a dumbbell at a small gym close to home. It was a humble place, without fans or air-conditioning, but it became my second home, where I trained earnestly and diligently six times a week. I got my hands on every fitness and bodybuilding-related magazine or book I could obtain, and fed myself with as much information as I could. Being the only female at the gym was daunting and uncomfortable, but I told myself that it was a matter of ambition. I began seeing changes in my physique, and that gave me the strength and motivation to keep at my training.

When I completed high school, I began searching for a part-time job. At that point, it did not matter how much I would get paid. All I wanted was to be close to the fitness industry and learn the tricks of the trade. Hence, my six-month stint as an instructor at Fitness First began. At the same time, I began venturing into the modelling line to generate some side income, thus kick-starting some of the most exciting and exhilarating times of my life.

College began soon after. My first choice had been Sports Science, but due to discouragement from friends and family over future job opportunities, I decided to do a course related to language. My ultimate dream was to own a gym, or even better, a chain of gyms. Hence, the right decision was to have more stable, versatile career options with regular income, on top of freelancing as a personal trainer in order to finance my passion in the long run. Training never took a setback during my college days – I even trained during lunch breaks to make up for my busy schedule!

However, I realised that I was allowing myself to lose too much weight for modelling. While it was a fun, fast-paced period in my life, I always reminded myself that bodybuilding and fitness was the priority. I packed the pounds back on – in muscle.

Since then, I have tried to keep myself as close as possible to the bodybuilding universe by participating in online forums, watching competitions, and meeting numerous like-minded people along the way. These people have given me valuable advice, helped to point me in the direction of my goals, and even became my good friends, for which I am ever thankful.

I have also appeared in newspapers as a teenage bodybuilder and

personal trainer, designed training programmes for Women's Health and Beauty Magazine, and had a stint as a columnist for a local online fitness portal. However, my future in bodybuilding and fitness has always been uncertain and filled with challenges due to financial constraints and public perception that women should be soft and willowy, not heavy and muscular. Furthermore, there is no outlet for female bodybuilders in Malaysia, which is very demotivating. After four years, I am still the only female in my gym that trains seriously.

Nevertheless, I try my very best to stick to what I love and aspire to be one day. I still work as a freelance personal trainer and a part-time model. At the same time, I am pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in English at Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR). In life, we may all face let downs, disappointments, and discouragements, but I still believe in making the best out of our circumstances. Bodybuilding has, after all, given me great satisfaction. I still wonder where life will take me, but regardless of everything, I am going to enjoy it the best way I know how; believing in what I love wholeheartedly, and doing whatever I can to sustain this lifestyle.

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and discouragements, but I still believe in making the
best out of our circumstances.*



The Ride of my Life

Law Tzuo Hann, 26, is currently back in school at the University of Pennsylvania. He hopes to have a doctorate in Economics before he turns 30, and to stay in shape while he's at it.

My secondary school education was spread across three different schools. First, I went to SMJK Kerian in Parit Buntar for a year. After that, I attended Penang Free School for another year before completing the remaining three years in St. George Institution in Taiping. After SPM, I earned the ASEAN Scholarship. Two weeks into the programme, however, I received the PSD scholarship and subsequently accepted it. After a year in Shah Alam, I pursued my bachelor's degree at Duke University in North Carolina.

Many can probably relate to my struggles in choosing the right major. After much deliberation, I opted for Biomedical Engineering. I really did not want to be a doctor, but my father felt otherwise, so I chose a major that was as close as possible to medicine – where my dad wanted me to be – and still remained in an engineering degree, which is where I thought I wanted to be. I finished the major, and completed a second major in economics.

Post-graduation, I was plagued with a lot of unanswered questions. The Danes have a saying that goes “Pick a horse and ride it”. My problem was that I did not know which horse to ride.

I had the options of going directly into graduate school, looking for a job in the US, or returning home to Malaysia to find work. Instead of taking up any of the aforementioned options, I decided to pursue what I really wanted to do. I wanted to travel and see the world, its people, and its wonders – so I

decided to do just that. In fact, the idea had been lingering at the back of my mind since the second year of university and I had saved up enough money for it. In the last two months before graduation, I purchased all the equipment needed and prepared myself for the only method of travel that would give me sufficient exposure to people and places, not break my budget, and get me home in a decent amount of time. I decided to cycle home. My trip started in Los Angeles; I cycled to Washington DC, flew to Dublin, cycled to Shanghai, and then, home to Malaysia.

The ten-month trip was not easy, but I certainly learnt more from my time on the road than from any other endeavour I have undertaken. During that time, I also took the opportunity to initiate a fundraiser that my father ran, and with the help of St. George's Old Boys, we managed to raise a quarter of a million ringgit for charity. I also persuaded my father to come cycle with me in the Gobi Desert, and we had a wonderful experience during our two weeks there together. I am currently writing a book about my experiences and with luck, it will be published in 2009.

Upon getting home, I was still confused over my future. I still carried personal baggage such as relationship issues, and I still did not know 'which horse to ride'. What followed for me soon after was a two-month stint with the DAP political party, which I thought was doing a wonderful job at bringing about change in this country. After that, I did six months of consultation work as an analyst. I quickly discovered that the corporate world, with all its financial lure and promise, was not for me.

What I really wanted to do was to make a difference in society and in academia, and hopefully, explore new frontiers of knowledge. Thus, I applied and was accepted to the University of Pennsylvania, where I am currently studying Economics. Hopefully, I will be able to contribute as an academician, and in time, use that as leverage to contribute to society.

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To Sport or Not?

Lee Kang Xian, 22, better known as Jason Lee to his peers, is a Diploma in Social Science (Counselling) graduate from TAR College and a freelance Certified Fitness Trainer accredited by the International Sports Sciences Association and National Exercise and Sports Trainer Association. He is currently pursuing a major in Psychology at UCSI University.

I contemplated quitting high school when I was 14, as I was without much interest for my studies. I would have, if not for my interest in sports. I was a school and district representative in basketball and Taekwondo, and almost made it to the state level if not for my injuries. I was actively competing until 2005, the year of my SPM examinations, in which I underwent two operations on my right knee due to an injury suffered at a Taekwondo competition. As a result, my 'career' in competitive sports ended prematurely, and I stayed home for four months in preparation for SPM, as it was inconvenient for me to attend school.

While waiting for my SPM results, I undertook several administrative jobs ranging from data entry to telemarketing. My stint ended as soon as it began, for I discovered that the office environment only limited me. During this time span, I started exploring paths I could pursue, one of which was Sports Science. However, there were not many private institutions offering such courses back then. Sports Psychology was another option, but it was

only available for students pursuing postgraduate studies after completing an undergraduate degree in Psychology. I found that Psychology also offers a wide career prospect in Advertising and Human Resource, to name a few, besides dealing with mental illness.

Having received my SPM results, I discovered that TAR College was offering Sports & Exercise Science as a pioneer course, and opted for it while placing Social Science as my second choice. Ultimately, I was offered Social Science with a major in Counselling instead. Nevertheless, I decided to enrol into TAR College's Diploma in Social Science (Counselling) programme for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted to transfer credits to The University of South Australia under their special 2+1 collaboration, where I could graduate with a degree in Psychology within three years. Secondly, I only needed to commit myself to two years in the Diploma programme if I found myself at odds with the course.

To my surprise, I enjoyed studying at college. I took pleasure from the free and intellectual discussions, gradually observing my surroundings with a wider perspective. During the second semester of my first year, I was hired as a Student Assistant in the college's gym co-curricular programme, having passed the same co-curricular test earlier. My task was similar to a Fitness Instructor; I coached students in cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility training. I truly enjoyed what I was doing and was glad for such an unexpected opportunity.

Thereafter, I started inquiring about careers in the fitness industry and uncovered some bright prospects. As such, I pursued an internationally recognised certification as a fitness trainer for a year with the prestigious International Sports Sciences Association. I continued working with the college as a Student Assistant-cum-Fitness Instructor for almost two years, after which I completed my diploma programme in 2008. As part of my undergraduate programme, I did a weekly practicum at the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Unit of UKM Medical Centre for seven weeks, and immediately decided to scratch a career in Clinical or Counselling Psychology off my options.

After completing my diploma, I worked as a Personal Trainer with a renowned fitness centre in the South East Asian region. As I reflected on

whether to pursue a degree in Psychology or Sports Science, I met a senior trainer in the fitness centre who graduated from University Malaya in Sports Science, with almost 14 years of experience in the industry. He encouraged me to pursue a degree in Psychology instead. The reason was simple: the prospects for Sports Science in Malaysia are limited, while fitness certifications from US-based organisations such as the International Sports Sciences Association gained higher standing.

With that said, after a month at the fitness centre, I decided to enrol into UCSI University's Degree in Psychology programme due to internship opportunities extended by the university. Personally, I find that internship opportunities are important to further explore our areas of interest besides gaining valuable work experience.

Today, I am a Psychology student, a freelance Certified Fitness Trainer with the International Sports Sciences Association and National Exercise and Sports Trainer Association, and an event photographer. Looking ahead, I aspire to intern with the Sports Science Department of the National Sports Institute to determine if Sports Science is indeed the path for me. As I embark on this journey, my initial goal may ultimately vary as I tread upon this vast open field, overflowing with endless opportunities.

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Paradigm Shifts

Lee Lian Kong, 20, is currently battling Cambridge A-levels at Taylor's University, and hopes to emerge triumphant to study law at the University of Manchester. She dreams of fighting for a world where the colour of one's skin is not the measure of one's worth, and one's acts of conscience not a platform for persecution.

It seemed simple; the transition from a small government school in Kajang to a private college, from SPM to A-levels, and from protective parents to newfound independence.

It was not.

Back then, my ambition was to be a doctor. Perhaps I was fed by the Malaysian mentality, which maintains that good grades only meant a career as a doctor. Maybe all the “Good... become doctor can earn a lot! Can buy BMW 7 series! Can save lives! Very noble!” got to me. Perhaps it was the glamorous social standing. Armed with these naïve reasons, close to zero research, and nil soul searching, I blindly signed up for Pre-Medicine Cambridge A-levels at Taylor's University.

My first six months were disastrous. I played hard but did not work as hard. I had brought along my overconfident ‘big fish, small pond’ mentality and thought that A-levels was a breeze when it was actually a hurricane. Simply put, I was a cricket player who did not know she was playing ping-pong, and thus began my fall from grace.

It was hard and painful to realise that I was just a small fish in a big pond now. Thus, I took the easy route out – denial. Besides that, I was experiencing freedom for the first time whereby parties replaced debating and looking ‘in’ superseded homework. At times, I would be asking myself; where was the girl who gave a 100 per cent in whatever she did to make her parents proud? Where was that spirited advocate who argued debate motions fiercely? As these stark realisations struck me, I felt myself spiralling downwards.

I hit rock bottom.

My grades were ABC’s – abysmal, bad, and catastrophic. Any personal development was stagnant. I was getting terrible at reading, writing, and debating. Enough was enough – I was a disappointment. That was the truth. I was wasting my parent’s money and throwing away precious time and potential by morphing into a shallow bimbo. Something had to be done; thus, I created my very own pivotal paradigm shift, and translated it into action.

I got my classmate to tutor me in Physics concepts that I found incomprehensible. I bought past year papers, made mind maps, and reviewed lessons after college instead of hanging out. I finally immersed myself actively in my Model United Nations club, reignited my debating skills, and acquired the art of diplomacy. I spent my money on books that would help me grow as a person. In addition, I grabbed the opportunity to attend talks by Bill Clinton and Professor Jose Ramos Horta to gain insights about their illustrious lives.

In the end, the results were encouraging and I was relieved to be back on track. Retrospectively, I now view my six months of deviation as a silver lining for two reasons. For one, it gives me a constant source of inspiration whenever idleness strikes. Having experienced it, the memory of being a disappointment is too excruciating to relive. Secondly, rekindling the flame of my former self who dreamt of great things made me realise who I really am, what I am best at, and how I can maximize my potential to fight for the causes I believe in.

It was then that I discovered medicine was not a passion of mine. Instead, my passion lies with speaking, particularly on the abuse of human rights. As

such, I spent many hours researching about Law to obtain every little detail. The more I learnt about it, the more convinced I became, realising that I could utilise my ability to speak to advocate for the victims of human rights abuse. A quote by Thomas Friedman is a favourite of mine, “If you want your causes to have an impact, you have to be where the laws are made”.

Though I have gained unconditional offers to read law in the University of Manchester and the University of Edinburgh, I had to decline them due to financial constraints. I refuse to be bogged down by debts the moment I graduate – thus, I am now applying for universities that provide scholarships. I am now expanding on a business idea to bring it to greater heights, reading to prepare for upcoming interviews, and writing to ensure those creative juices do not remain stagnant.

My journey after SPM is not an extraordinary one. In fact, it is extremely ordinary. Too often, we are too hasty, too ignorant, too contented. I wasted six months to figure that out; a whole lot of difference could have happened in that period of time! Instead, learn from the mistakes of others, mine for one, and abandon yourself to your passion to craft your own success story. As Winston Churchill once said, “There is no crime as great as daring to excel”. Commit that crime.

As Winston Churchill once said, “There is no crime as great as daring to excel”. Commit that crime.



Seeing the World Beyond our Shores

Ken Vin Lek, 20, desires to make a difference in this world. He is about to complete his A-levels at Taylor's University under the President's Award Scholarship and head over to the University of Edinburgh to read Medicine. He firmly believes that we should live a life where you are grateful for what you have and serve the less fortunate community, for everyone in this world deserves an equal shot at everything.

My high school life was monotonous and one-dimensional. In fact, the time spent glossing through thick history text books and practicing math questions now seems far from what life is truly about. I have chosen the road more taken by pursuing A-levels in a relatively famous institution, Taylor's University. This time around, however, I was not contented with just scoring perfect grades. It felt incomplete – I felt incomplete. Grades still mattered, of course, but the diligence that I applied to achieve that A also had to be channelled towards more meaningful causes.

Thus, I founded the Taylor's Model United Nations club in this college because I believed it could be the platform for today's youth to actually see the world beyond our shores and realise that there's more to life than just studying. Within its first year, it achieved great heights. Having attended 5

MUN conferences, we took it a level further.

When the war between Palestine and Israel sparked, we knew we could not let this issue slip by unnoticed. Awareness was vital, yet it was lacking – we had to make the plight of war refugees known to everybody. We were adamant that no one would be left ignorant about it. The only way to do so was to create a bang, and what better way than to invite Tun Dr Mahathir to speak his views regarding the issue.

The provocative and engaging discussion saw active participation from all Taylorians – not only did the students recognise the war on the other side of the world, but they also recognised the need to be involved in helping the refugees. The birth of consciousness for humanity in those students from this event remains the greatest highlight of my tenure in this club as President. Not only did I feel more fulfilled, I was also proud that I had done my best to pave, if not construct, the way towards a better tomorrow.

I was also an avid advocate for raising awareness on AIDS. Being the president of the Pre-Medical Society, I served as a volunteer and activist for the Malaysian AIDS Council, as the staggering numbers of people living with AIDS in this country are bound to increase exponentially if nothing is done now. I realised that this club could act as the pivot to put a full stop to this predicament. With that, I organised awareness campaigns, and gathered groups of volunteers to help out at the International AIDS Memorial Day as part of the effort to make this issue known to the people.

Medicine has always been my passion. It may have initially stemmed from other reasons but I am glad that it is now because of wanting, in whatever way I can, to help improve and make a difference in healthcare so that everybody has a chance to live healthily and thus, happily. That, I believe, is the position I must take and the role I must play in all of our efforts to create the best tomorrow.

What changed my perception of life – which previously focused on status and materialism – to one of compassion and humanitarianism was my trip to the rural areas of Miri. There, I witnessed the plight of people who had lived with disfigurements for 30 years. I saw the sufferings of helpless parents

trying to ease their babies' pain, and kids not being able to talk, hear, or even eat properly because of their cleft lip – all because they were not city dwellers or wealthy enough to procure healthcare. I was disappointed by this injustice, and these events unleashed my drive to one day ensure everyone gets equal treatment regardless of their bank statements, who they are, or where they come from.

Come September, I will be off in pursuit of my ambition. I have received an offer to read Medicine in the University of Edinburgh and if everything goes well, I will be on my way. I have always believed that it is when we stand on the shoulders of giants that we are able to see further and in my case, it is the institution where I will be seeking my tertiary education.

I leave you not with my experience, but with a challenge that every single one of us has what it takes to shape and mould the world to live in a better tomorrow.

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Three Cheers for Conservation

Leona Liman, 26, is a conservation educator for the Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Programme. She studied to be a forester in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and was trained as an English teacher. She works in remote communities, teaches rural and urban students, and trains conservation staff and teachers on conservation education.

I studied Matriculation after SPM as a biological science student. I loved biology, so I picked Medicine, Pharmacy, and Dentistry in my IPTA application form. I nearly fainted when I called the hotline later and discovered that I was accepted to study forestry science! What was I supposed to do with that degree? Sell firewood?

My parents could not afford private education, so I enrolled in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) against every grain in my body. I applied to switch to another course after getting decent grades in my first semester, but was duly rejected.

Being away from home and treated as a second-class citizen was really hard. Back in Sarawak, I shared meals, clothes, and daily life with roommates of all races. At my university, students got roommates of the same race or the same home state. There were also occasions where people made remarks about Sarawak as if it was not a Malaysian state! A comment like “*Jauhnya awak belajar ke Malaysia* (How far you have travelled to study in Malaysia)”

made me want to show my identity card to prove my citizenship.

However, my wicked sense of humour helped me cope with my frustrations and I pulled off countless harmless pranks. I did not give my best effort in my studies, even though I knew I could have gotten perfect scores each semester – I hated the course.

After graduating in 2005 with honours and a decent CGPA, friends encouraged me to pursue my Masters. However, my father was still burdened with my siblings' education expenses, so he told me to work. Furthermore, I was not confident of pulling off the alternative – studying while working – and I was not keen on doing something just for the sake of doing it. One of my lecturers also commented that it is better to work before returning to school because you will be surer of what you want to study. I followed his advice and applied to be an English tutor.

I remembered taking my family out to dinner with my first pay cheque. I was so proud of myself, even if my earnings were peanuts compared to the workload. I literally made a living from marking piles of books, seven days straight. Yet, I discovered that I loved teaching and interacting with students. The only downside was that my colleagues and I would be reduced to tears by the principal over every mistake we made. Thus, I decided that I loved teaching, but preferably in a less hostile environment. Later on, I became a conservation educator for the Wildlife Conservation Society-Malaysia Program (WCS), an international non-profit organisation that works to save wildlife and wild lands.

The job required me to teach about *orang utans*, a great ape species with DNA almost matching ours. I travelled extensively to communities to conduct education programmes in Iban, my mother tongue. To prepare myself, I read books in Iban (but they might as well have been written in Arabic) and listened to Iban radio. I also spoke Iban more often at home instead of the usual English-Iban mix. Did I also mention self-deprecating humour is a great icebreaker? I use it all the time at work. I guess practice (during university) does make perfect.

What does a conservation educator do? The job requires someone able

to interact with different audiences, and preferably speak the same language as the target audience. For example, a typical programme in a longhouse can involve villagers of various age groups. Some of these villagers may be illiterate; hence, the use of images during a presentation helps to bring the conservation message across. We also frequently use play-acting with self-created costumes and Iban traditional stories to explain links between them and wildlife. Ibans in particular have close connections to animals, which is evident in the patterns of their traditional dances, weaving, and tapestry. Towards the end of the programme, there is always an open dialogue where anyone can ask questions related to WCS or wildlife and we do our best to answer them.

I have grown a lot since my first day as a conservation educator, courtesy of great mentors and supportive colleagues, all passionate about conservation. The people I have met, the work that I have done, and the places that I have visited have shaped my wonderful life as an educator. There were also moments when I had to deal with difficult, uncooperative audience, but I guess you cannot win all the time.

For SPM graduates, do not worry if you messed up (or think you did) in your studies. There is indeed life after SPM, and it is a wonderful, exciting world waiting to be explored. All choices are half-chances, but you are a winner if you use what you have and make the best of it.

*All choices are half-chances, but you are a winner
if you use what you have and make the best of it.*



To Fail

Fu Han Liang, 20, is a sophomore at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, majoring in Business and minoring in Political Science, and possibly English! He is very passionate about international voluntary work, swimming, and writing. 'To Fail' was written as a reminder to himself and a note to others that we can fail. And when we do, we move forward.

I am not going to talk about how I fared in my SPM examinations, how I qualified for the national levels in swimming, or how I obtained a scholarship from the Central Bank of Malaysia. Instead, I shall talk about a failure; one that I believe is most humbling.

I vividly remember the day failure came knocking. Even as I anticipated April 1, 2008 along with millions of other US university admission applicants, I did not expect it to be one of the most disappointing days of my life. When the time finally came, I nervously logged in to the decision websites of the respective universities to which I had applied. What I saw was rejection after rejection. By the time I had reviewed the last of those decision pages, it was clear that no school had accepted me. It was then that I finally broke into tears. Watching my peers scream in joy about their acceptance into college was even more disheartening. Everything crumbled right before me. I was in despair.

However, I was fortunate to gain admission to the university I am currently enrolled in, but only after I spent weeks lingering anxiously on the waiting list.

To be completely honest, it was not my top choice – in fact, it was my last – but beggars cannot be choosers, so I made do with the hand I was dealt.

And when you are out of options, you make do with what you have. I was not going to let a downfall hinder my goal to achieve the best possible college education I had always hoped for. I talked incessantly about getting a liberal arts education, and that was what I was going to get. I challenged myself with courses I thought were most appealing: Political Science, Economics, and Mathematics. I never stopped participating in extracurricular activities. I travelled, attended social events, and managed to do everything I initially thought was only achievable in those ‘dream universities’ that had rejected me.

Unfortunately, I am still unable to be thankful for what I went through on April 1, 2008. Sometimes I toss and turn in bed, thinking about life in the dormitory of another college that I had dreamt of attending. I constantly sigh in regret when thinking about the road I was never given an opportunity to traverse. However, I have plenty to be thankful for. For one, I am satisfied with the holistic education I am currently pursuing. I am so grateful to be blessed with new friends who are willing to cherish my highest highs and endure my lowest lows. Most importantly, I look back and realise that I am actually very pleased with the person I have become thus far – a student at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

I now share this with you because failure is the most relevant aspect in our race to get into the top-ranked universities, the most successful careers, or the best grades in school. The biggest failure is to not acknowledge the reality that you can be let down in many instances. The real answer to the question “What’s after SPM?” is: moving on despite the failures. Prepare for the best and the worst. Perhaps you might be lucky enough to be offered three scholarships, or end up disappointed like the many well-qualified friends I know. You might also choose to put studying on hold and start working in a bank, or even at a car repair workshop.

Whatever your options may be, I implore you to make do with what you have. If you fail to obtain funding to study abroad and still want to further your education, study locally at our many prestigious universities. If you

realise that you are most passionate about a field that many have not chosen (and sometimes look down upon), I urge you to pursue it anyway. If you choose to work immediately after you graduate from school, think of it as a head start.

And if you fail at something every once in a while, maybe write an essay about it, and laugh aloud when you are done.

*The biggest failure is to not acknowledge the reality
that you can be let down in many instances.*

NOT FOR SALE



Matriculation and Me

Lim Gene-Harn, 20, a former SMK Damansara Jaya student, is currently pursuing the matriculation programme implemented by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in Malacca Matriculation College.

Controversial debates about the quality of the matriculation programme remain rife in the media and Malaysian blogosphere over a decade after its conception. For me, the decision to pursue the programme became a crucial transition point in my life. The school environment became a significant factor for me as I weighed my options. I believe that investing time outside our family and comfort zone increases our chances to meet vastly different personalities and widens our worldview.

Being the son of a single parent, I knew that this path would greatly ease my mother's financial burden as the government sponsors the matriculation programme. In addition, an allowance of RM1,250 is distributed to every student each semester, and this excludes the registration fees. At time of writing, ten per cent of the places are allocated to non-bumiputera students. Do consult your counsellors regarding registration around the third quarter of your SPM year if you are interested in taking up the programme. The new intake is held around May each year, with the course duration being around 11 months.

The matriculation programme, which requires all students to stay on

campus, offers cheap food and has zero transportation expenses. Three foundation streams are available: physical science, biological science, and accounting. Also, it is one of only three ways to enter local public universities – the others being STPM and diploma programmes in local universities – and local public university education can save you a bomb compared to private ones.

Diversity – I think that word encapsulates the student culture at my college. I have learnt to appreciate the environment here and the lessons it offers. Being a KL junkie, this place has opened my eyes to the different personalities of people who come from vastly different backgrounds. Youths from different states, different faiths and religion, different races, different socioeconomic strata, different political views, different levels of education attainment, and different skills and talents all congregate here. Undoubtedly, there is cultural diversity in all local colleges, but I suspect that there is nothing quite like the melting pot that is a matriculation college.

If you were to compare the matriculation programme with other pre-university programmes, the former would be the best path if you intend to study in a local public university due to its short course duration, its ease compared to STPM, and the fact that it is fully subsidised. The only disadvantage is that it has yet to gain recognition from various foreign universities.

My two cents for post-SPM students is that stepping into college is all about equipping yourself for challenges, be they of the academic, environmental, social, or mental variety. Remember to abide by your principles and pause every now and then to contemplate where you stand. Life is not a race but a journey, and the terrain of life is filled with wonderful and astounding details. Slow down and take in its richness because your pre-university course (or other post-SPM pathways) will be over sooner than you think. Choose the course that you think suits you best, and remember that what and where you study does not necessarily determine your future career.

Another thing to learn by heart during the matriculation programme is to be open-minded and assimilate into the social world around you. Life here is not all about getting a 4.0 cumulative grade point average (CGPA), but also

about discovering different people and appreciating them for who they are! You have to be colour blind to experience some of the interracial bonding which makes life in a matriculation college so interesting.

There is also an abundance of activities that will fill up your schedule every week! Maximising your contacts is also important to secure friends for your future projects in university and working life. If you are into sports, remember to participate in KAKOM (Inter Matriculation Colleges Carnival), which promises you tons of joy and benefits, including the opportunity to witness Malaysians from all walks of life coming together in the name of sports.

I believe that there are no assurances of the merits that each tertiary education pathway promises. As for me, Matriculation has been one of the most beautiful chapters in my life, and I have no regrets in pursuing this awesome path. Whichever path we may take, the rewards we reap greatly depend on our own readiness to face unexpected challenges and harness the opportunities that come our way.

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the opportunities that come our way.*



The Road More Travelled

Lim Pei Xin, 24, studied A-levels at Anderson Junior College, Singapore but did not complete it, choosing to pursue his Bachelor's degree in Biology at Purdue University, USA instead. He will be pursuing his PhD in Genetics and Development at Cornell University this August. He indulges in the pleasures of baking and eating cheesecakes.

After SPM, I was offered a place in a Singaporean junior college under the ASEAN scholarship. During that brief time, I became more willing to try out new things to become better prepared for the changes life would bring. I was not very athletic in high school, but I dared myself to join track and field competitions and other outdoor activities, and I grew to love wall-climbing and kayaking. The new environment really made me step out of my comfort zone and the normality of my life. Physically and mentally, I became a different person. Many people, I assume, would know or have heard of the high expectations for academic excellence in a junior college, but I personally experienced the fun, non-academic side as well.

Six months later, however, I received an offer from the Public Service Department (PSD) to study in the United States. I faced the dilemma of having to choose between the small foundations I had built and grown attached to (the friendships and the life) or the opportunity of a definite pathway to a bachelor's degree. In the end, cold hard reasoning triumphed over emotional

doubt. I chose to discontinue my A-levels. All of my peers who were in a similar situation made the same decision too, as did our seniors and the seniors before them. Obviously, I did not learn anything from the poem 'The Road Not Taken' that I had been taught in English literature.

In retrospect, I do not regret taking the more-travelled road. After a year in the foundation program of INTEC UiTM Shah Alam, I pursued my bachelor's degree in Biology at Purdue University, Indiana. I was exposed to quality education, many research opportunities, and an enriching college life. I have met many professors devoted to their work and peers committed to pursuing their dreams. All these stimuli increased my enthusiasm in further understanding the subject of Biology. I enjoyed participating actively in class as well as defining my interests. I applied for internships, taught courses that I had taken in previous years, and engaged in hands-on research, all of which gave me experiences I value most today. In short, every moment became an opportunity to learn and grow in many different ways.

May 15, 2009 was my graduation day, but it was not the end of my academic journey. I decided to further my studies as I felt that my knowledge of biology was inadequate; hence, I applied to a few top universities and went for campus visits during my last semester in Purdue. The application process was gruesome and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) was tough. Fortunately, many helpful online forums such as Collegeconfidential.com helped me filter the universities I should apply for. I also sought the national rankings of various biology programs via the US News and World Report website, as well as Phds.org. The former provides more general rankings, while the latter is tailored to an individual's priorities on various aspects such as education quality, faculty reputation, funding support, student demography, and programme size.

I was lucky enough that one of my top preferences, Cornell University, invited me for a weekend campus visit. It was both stressful and enjoyable at the same time. The first day consisted of seven interviews with various professors in the field I had chosen. Some quizzed me on technical questions, some on ethical ones, but most of them asked about my research experiences. That was the stressful part. However, all the professors I spoke to were

amazingly humble and amiable. It was so enlightening to listen to them elucidate on their works and projects with such passion and dedication. That was the pleasurable part, not to mention the expense-free trips to fancy dinners, tours, and vineyard trips on the second day. That was the secondary objective of the visit, of course, but absolutely gratifying nonetheless.

Two weeks later, I was offered a full scholarship to pursue a PhD in the field of Genetics and Development. If PSD allows the deferment of its service bond, I will be going to Cornell in August 2009. That is my story so far, but I believe there are still many exciting things in store for me at Cornell, just as there are many awesome possibilities in front of you, fresh out of SPM and finally free from high school. Be it studying or working, the most important thing to remember is to build upon and pursue your own interests. That way, you will most certainly enjoy life.

*In the end, cold hard reasoning
triumphed over emotional doubt.*



Dream a Little Dream

Lim Rue-Hann, 24, is a local university student who finds joy in organising events, piloting projects, and championing charity initiatives. She loves making friends of different nationalities and enjoys meeting people from all walks of life, be it fellow students, sex workers, or senior executives.

“I want to do Mass Communications or Event Management, mom.”

“I think it is better if you pursue a usual pre-university course first.”

Little did I know that I would end up being called for National Service and have to take STPM instead. Life is not always a bed of roses; I was worried about my mother’s financial burden as she is a single parent raising two children without any additional financial support. I also worked part-time as a tuition teacher to supplement her income.

After SPM, it was STPM. So what came after STPM?

“I still want to do Mass Communications or Event Management, mom.”

“And I still think it is better if you pursue a more professional degree.”

Once again, I listened to her advice and pursued a degree in Nutrition at a local university. It was not too bad, considering that I loved health sciences. Yet, something was missing. You see, I had always been an outgoing girl, eager to meet new people and organise events. My dream was to work in the mass communications sector, whether it was in event management or public relations. Alas, I had not taken any steps towards the fulfillment of this dream

because my elders had encouraged me to secure a professional degree. I felt that I was studying for the sake of graduating. Then I asked myself, “Is this how I want my university life to be?” Clearly, the answer was No.

You may wonder what I did next. Maybe I took a bold step, dropped my current course, and headed straight for a degree in Mass Communications? Well, I chose to look at the situation from a different perspective. I decided to make full use of my current degree and merge it with things I liked to do – mass communications and event management. That was when I joined an international youth organization called AIESEC in 2006. It was a place where I discovered and developed my potential by participating in leadership seminars and organising various projects.

We also reached out to marginalised communities such as sex workers, people living with HIV, and transsexuals. My most memorable experience is 2008’s HIV/AIDS project, which aimed to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS and reduce stigmatisation. Memories which will forever be etched in my mind include seeing healthy youths talking proactively to these marginalised groups to know more about the challenges they face, and also passionately raising funds to help HIV/AIDS high risk groups. I knew we impacted those youths, and I hope they will pass on the knowledge they gained and inspire others with their informed attitudes.

Another great experience was in 2009 when I took a great step forward to join the congress committee for the AIESEC International Congress, which took place in Malaysia. This is AIESEC’s largest annual conference, where 600 youth leaders from over 100 countries across different cultures, beliefs, and values come together to make our world a better place. The period of working with the congress committee was my once in a lifetime experience, where I worked with 50 people from 20 countries and made many international friends. I was overjoyed by the many soft skills I gained from what I did, and believed that all these experiences would put me in good stead for the future.

Furthermore, I held on to my dream when the time came for me to choose my industrial training ground. I received many suggestions of well-known food nutrition companies. However, I chose to do what I loved and wanted

to learn more about. It took a while but I finally found the exact company I wanted – a health communication company. I felt satisfied when I succeeded, for it proved anew that we should never give up our dreams easily. Never assume the ‘herd mentality’ just because people doubt your decision.

There is so much to discover in life. You have to experiment with many things before knowing where your true potential lies. University life is a fabulous platform for you to discover and develop yourself. Explore yourself thoroughly; work hard on goals you want to achieve, meet different people, and gain more experience in order to be better equipped for the working world.

Throughout my university journey thus far, I have met different people from different countries while organising projects and events. I have learnt a lot from inspiring leaders. I have broadened my perspective on life and built a wide, diverse circle of friends. I have tried, failed, and then succeeded.

I have my dreams, and you have yours. I am finally working my way towards mine. This is my story, and I would love to hear yours in the future.

Explore yourself thoroughly; work hard on goals you want to achieve, meet different people, and gain more experience in order to be better equipped for the working world.



Be Wise, Think Twice

Louis Yap Jun Hao, 19, is currently pursuing Psychology at HELP University College. He rock climbs occasionally, and plays Ultimate Frisbee when he is not busy catching up on the latest music, movies, and events.

The easiest way to start this essay would be by introducing myself. So that I shall do! My name is Louis Yap, and I turned 19 last February. I was born and bred in Petaling Jaya, took the Foundation in Arts course at HELP University College, and am currently pursuing Psychology at the same institution.

Although I studied in Sekolah Sri Cempaka from preschool to Form Five, I can assure you that my family is not as well off as you might imagine. Growing up among peers who seemed to be fed with golden cornflakes (pun intended), it seemed as if being rich was what got you everything, and that education was the key to getting rich. My paradigm has since changed; education is important, no matter what you do.

My dad had chosen an IT course at the Asian Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT) for me. Having already respected his wishes when it came to choosing my stream in Form Four, it was time I made my own decision. Instead of starting college in January like most of my peers, I chose to take three months off to weigh my options. I also thought it served as a well-deserved break after 12 continuous years of schooling, although I did enjoy every moment of it.

I took up a part-time job, and it was a very worthwhile experience; it taught me responsibility, accountability, and most importantly, people skills. I met all kinds of people – from typical, nonchalant locals to the most eccentric foreigner – and adapted to each one differently. In retrospect, those interpersonal skills served me well when I finally began college, for I met a myriad of personalities. I thought about my interests; they ranged from event management and mass communications to Psychology, which had recently caught my attention. I also remember attending the FACON education fair in Putra World Trade Centre, where I collected brochures from various universities regarding their pre-university programmes.

The one that finally caught my attention was the Foundation in Arts course at HELP University College. After speaking to their counsellor, I became quite certain that it was what I wanted to pursue. I thought it over, looked through the massive pile of pamphlets I brought home, and decided that it was the most suitable course for me.

A-levels were completely out of the picture, simply because I was sick of an education system where your grades were decided solely upon exam performance; I feel there is more to education than just what you regurgitate on a piece of paper. The foundation course seemed just right, as marks were allocated for assignments and presentations, which meant that non-academic skills were taken seriously as well. The pros included the acquisition of crucial work ethics, team coordination skills, and the ability to speak in public with confidence. The cons were that you had to take all your work seriously, and procrastination was Public Enemy number one. After all, even if you do really well during your examinations, a strong final grade cannot be achieved without a similar performance in one's assignments.

The main reason I settled on Foundation in Arts at HELP was the variety of subjects offered. From the usual business subjects like Economics and Accounts and Marketing, to subjects such as Public Relations and C Programming, it was comforting to know that I could try out these subjects as electives, as I did not know what I wanted to do just yet.

What I liked best about my programme was how easy it was to meet people.

It really surprised me how everyone was so easy going, and easy to get along with. The Foundation programme also organised interesting activities – as a student in this course, it is compulsory to attend a fun Leadership Camp!

I would tell those considering this course to think it through carefully. If you are more familiar with the secondary school system, this will take some getting used to. Another thing to consider is its international reputation – as a local course, it is not as internationally recognised as A-levels or the International Baccalaureate programme. So if you plan on furthering your studies overseas after your pre-university, those two would be more appropriate. Another pre-university option would be Monash University Foundation Year, which equates to automatic entry should you decide to enter Monash University.

Another thing I would tell SPM-leavers or soon-to-be SPM-takers, is to keep in touch with your friends, and more importantly, value the time you have left with them, as you will be parting ways very soon, and time and distance takes their toll on any relationship. With that, I bid you adieu, and hope my writing has benefited you in some way or another.

Keep in touch with your friends, and more importantly, value the time you have left with them, as you will be parting ways very soon, and time and distance takes their toll on any relationship.



Heart for Art

Marilyn Ee, 22, graduated from Limkokwing University of Creative Technology with a Diploma in Classical 2-D Animation.

She is currently pursuing her degree in 3-D Animation at California State University, Northridge, California. With her passion for Animation and desire for academic excellence, she looks forward to gaining new experiences in the Animation industry.

By the time secondary school ended, I had 14 years worth of drawings that adorned paper, sketchbooks, textbooks, and virtually any medium a pencil could work on. Still, drawing was no more than a hobby at that time. I graduated from secondary school as a science student with grades good enough to enter a prominent discipline. However, the best of my interests and talents were not in the sciences – instead, I wanted to do something of the arts. I wanted to pursue Animation.

In Malaysia, art degrees are not actively encouraged, thus attracting few pursuers. Throughout my 11 years in school, I discovered no one who shared my passion, and I did not have many tertiary education options to choose from either. Furthermore, I could not foresee a local career in Animation in the short or long run. On the bright side, my parents were supportive of my decision, and I was fortunate enough to have a close relative who had taken a similar path. As such, I had an idea of the path I needed to take to become an animator.

I will not lie; while possible, animation or any art degree is not as easily pursued in Malaysia as compared to other countries. Malaysia is a young and developing nation; hence, its immediate needs are not in the arts. Therefore, if you are an aspiring artist – be it a fine artist, graphic designer, or animator – you will find your talent admired, but not necessarily appreciated. Apart from the limited level of education provided locally, scholarships will certainly be harder to procure.

Nevertheless, rare as they are, Animation programmes are still offered in Malaysia. The only universities known to offer full diplomas and/or degrees in Animation when I first began my journey was The One Academy and Limkokwing University of Creative Technology (LUCT). Currently, more universities are likely to offer similar courses, though the aforementioned institutions would be among one's best choices as they have run these programmes for several years now.

I started my journey in Animation at LUCT, where I received my Diploma in Classical 2-D Animation. Following that, I had the choice of remaining in LUCT to gain a degree in 3-D Animation. However, I had a personal goal; I wanted to pursue my degree in the United States instead. While studying abroad may not be everyone's ideal choice for various reasons, alternatives are always available. A more affordable option is to complete your tertiary education in the universities mentioned earlier. From what I gathered, work opportunities for Animation in Malaysia are present and progressively increasing. Otherwise, regional divisions of established Animation corporations in our neighbouring countries are worth looking into.

As a senior Animation student, I can testify that Animation is an extremely interesting field to venture into. If you have the passion for cartoons, studying Animation will give you practical insights on the history and methodology of Animation. In a strange way, your homework consists of watching animated movies and TV shows at times. However, as fun as it sounds, it requires just as much – if not more – hard work as any other career. One thing I learnt while studying Animation is that watching it completely differs from creating it. As with any other career, never step into Animation assuming that it is easy and

effortless. For what we lack in textbook reading, we make up in much-needed observing, thinking, and hands-on work to create the magic of moving images.

As a forewarning, Animation is likely to burn a hole in your pocket. Thankfully, there are ways to raise funds: undertaking full-time jobs while waiting for SPM results or part-time jobs during your college years help tremendously. If you have the time and patience, a degree in arts or Animation can always be attained a little later in life, as exemplified through countless stories of individuals who began their walk in Animation much later, yet still found and maintained jobs in the industry.

If you are an aspiring animator who firmly believes that Animation is your life-long career, stand strong for your dream and persevere. Obstacles, oppositions and challenges will arise, but let your passion drive you to overcome them. Work well in school because good grades are just as important in the arts as they are in the sciences. Maintain a humble and teachable mindset, as each day of an animator's life is a learning experience. Make good relations with the people in the small Animation industry – after all, they are whom you share a common interest with, besides potentially encountering them as future employers, contacts or mentors.

Finally, I wish all aspiring animators the best in your Animation adventure, and I hope to meet you in the industry someday!

*Obstacles, oppositions and challenges will arise,
but let your passion drive you to overcome them.*



Boarding the 'Independent' Ship

Melissa Kong, 19, studied her A-levels at Kolej Tuanku Ja'afar under a school scholarship. She is currently reading Chemistry at Oxford University and would like to be a philanthropist, but needs to acquire the means to do so first.

After SPM, I had to decide between two pre-university programmes – A-levels or the International Baccalaureate (IB). I did not want to wait until August to start, and after comparing the tuition fees, I opted for the former.

The only question left was, 'Where?'

Then all of a sudden, before I could tattoo my arm with something I might regret later on, dye my hair hot pink, and kiss my uniform-wearing days goodbye, the decision was made for me. Those plans were dashed: my interview for a scholarship had been successful, and I was to pack my bags and go off to boarding school – Kolej Tuanku Jaafar (KTJ), to be precise.

For a girl who always had the luxury of a home and family to turn to, studying in a boarding school was a huge leap. I struggled to adapt to new rules such as fixed bed times, set study hours, communal toilets and bathrooms – the list goes on. Believe me, getting used to sharing 20 shower cubicles with 75 other girls is not something that comes very naturally for most, unless you have already experienced life in a boarding school. Staying in school on weekdays, unless I wanted to pay for a cab or wait for the bus to go out, was a big change as well.

Initially, I did not enjoy the system at all. Perhaps I had overestimated my ability to adapt to new situations. Perhaps I had come with the wrong expectations. I could not adapt, I found it difficult to find someone to talk to and confide in, and I was not enjoying myself at all.

I ended my first term disheartened. I remember spending the final week of term crying myself to sleep, longing to rush back home. Seeing how miserable I was, my parents offered me the choice to stay or to go. I thought it through, but finally decided that I would not give up on the challenge of boarding school.

Gradually, I adapted to the system, made wonderful friends, and committed myself to studies and sports. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience at the Outward Bound School later that term in spite of the compromised hygiene, severe sunburns, and mosquito bites. Honestly speaking, the ten-hour kayak session and three-day jungle trek, alongside other activities, are not as tough as you think they might be, especially when supportive friends push you throughout the adventure. At last, I was able to call KTJ a home away from home, corny though it may sound.

The terms flew by. I learnt how to play hockey, attended an interview with Oxford University, and stayed up into the wee hours of the morning for three weeks to juggle my work and House Singing duties. And now I find myself in Upper Six, a mere term away from freedom and the dreaded final A-levels exams.

I am certain that when my time comes to bid KTJ goodbye, it will be bittersweet. I will finally be able to escape my uniform-wearing days, dye my hair an exotic colour, and once again have the luxury of a personal bathroom. But I will also be leaving a place that holds some of my best memories (communal bathrooms are actually a very good place for conversations!), saying goodbye to the pastoral care that I have been so grateful to have, and missing the fun of having friends who are literally always there for you.

In retrospect, life in boarding school was a good stepping-stone towards living an independent life. I did not just get older the way one does every year. I grew up, but under 'less harsh' conditions. I did not have to handle

everything on my own like friends at other colleges, but I had my own share of new responsibilities – doing my own laundry, arranging for my own transport to and from KTJ, my duties to the house as a senior student (e.g. ensuring my juniors went to bed at lights out, or else!). Unlike them, I also had a good support system – every student at KTJ is assisted with their university applications, especially if he or she is applying to the UK.

Admittedly though, boarding school life is not for everyone. If you need to go out and socialise often, if unbridled freedom is essential to your being, then perhaps you should give it a miss. But if you would like a different experience, and are not quite ready to handle total independence, then perhaps a British style boarding school may prove to be your cup of tea.

In retrospect, life in boarding school was a good stepping-stone towards living an independent life.



Going Beyond my Level Best with A-levels

Michael Chow, 20, is about to complete his final A-levels examination at HELP University College at time of writing. He received his primary school education at SJK (C) Damansara, secondary school education at SMK Bandar Utama Damansara (4), and is currently deciding between studying in Imperial College London or Carnegie Mellon University.

My friend once remarked that, “The best Malaysians are better than the best Singaporeans, yet the worst Malaysians are worse than the worst Singaporeans”.

I figured that his statement implied that Malaysia is a more varied society than Singapore, and this made me wonder – how could Malaysia’s linear, traditional SPM education system produce such wildly varying individuals? More importantly, why did I not become one of those wildly varying individuals?

I was a typical product of the Malaysian education system, a middle-class urbanite that was constantly badgered by his parents to study. Extra-curricular activities, character development, and pursuing personal passions always took the backseat throughout my entire primary and secondary education life. “Studies come first!” was the motto those days, and it was as if there was only one goal to achieve before leaving secondary school: getting straight A’s in SPM.

After that came and went, what was next? I had never done any previous planning, given much thought to what I wanted to do with my life, or even sat down to figure out my career goals. However, my parents had also told me to do one other thing all my life: study A-levels as it was prestigious, well-known, and one of the most challenging academic courses out there.

I chose to study at HELP University College mainly because its lecturers were well-known, but little did I know that there would be many other benefits stemming from this decision. Firstly, the Edexcel A-levels are undeniably less stressful than its Cambridge A-levels counterpart. With its modular system, students can slowly accumulate their marks, which contribute to the final grade, besides freely retaking papers until one achieved his or her desired results.

As such, this allowed me to rediscover my long lost passion for genuine learning and pursuing subjects out of personal interests, which died an unnatural death during the second half of my Chinese primary school years. When I was five to eight years old, I used to memorise interesting facts just for kicks, but when homework got heavier and imposed constraints upon my time, my interest in learning non-textbook related knowledge began to fizzle out.

However, with the relative flexibility granted by the Edexcel A-levels, I could once again pursue my intellectual interests. For the first time in almost a decade, I was finally free and sufficiently interested to read a book completely unrelated to my syllabus. I started reading novels, non-fiction books, and even subscribed to Newsweek and Discover Magazine. I felt liberated, for my mind was set free.

Besides that, students from all spectrums of society were lumped together in the A-levels course. There were the conventional studious students from Johor and Pahang, lazy rich kids who frequently skipped classes, and regular middle-class urbanites much like myself.

Coming from a homogeneous public education background, this was a bit of a culture shock, but more so when I first met the high-achievers from private schools. I had never encountered such a class of people, and I was amazed at how they outperformed regular public school students at being well-rounded individuals. It was as if they were born and bred to enter the Ivy Leagues.

Moreover, they had an air of distinction. You could sense that they were more motivated and possessed loftier ideals than the typical middle-class Malaysian. Although intimidated at first, I sought to learn from them, absorb the best of their qualities, adapt such qualities for myself, and thus tried to be on par with them.

As a result of my newly found intellectual freedom and the interaction with the private school ultra achievers, I eventually received the greatest benefit of all: self-discovery. I became motivated to search for my identity, and I invested both time and energy to discover my interests and inclinations by reading widely. Eventually, this led to my career choice: to specialise in the engineering and economics of renewable energy.

Now, I can proudly say that I am a unique individual in my own right. I am finally someone with his own dream. It is not necessarily different from everyone else's, but it is still completely genuine, and wholly mine.

I am not saying that every student who enrolls at HELP's A-levels will receive the same measure of benefits as I did, but by reading this, you now know that HELP's Edexcel A-levels provides you the time to pursue your own interests and the opportunities to meet some of Malaysia's best human capital.

Just remember, A-levels are one of the many opportunities in life. What you decide to make of this particular opportunity, or any other, ultimately decides your own fate.

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and the interaction with the private school
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benefit of all: self-discovery.*



Empowering Youths with Opportunities

Michael Teoh Su Lim, 23, is the co-founder of Youth Entrepreneurs Malaysia, an organisation that empowers youths with entrepreneurship opportunities. Michael's experiences in global business competitions and youth NGOs became platforms for him to impact youths positively by creating opportunities for them.

He was one of the finalists for the 2008 AYA Most Outstanding Youth Award.

Hailing from SMK Tinggi Bukit Mertajam (Pak Lah's alma mater) came with huge expectations. I was relatively weak in sports and was often ridiculed for being a *kaki bangku*. However, I believe it was a blessing in disguise as that compelled me to develop my soft skills via drama competitions and public speaking opportunities.

Eventually, those abilities would be highly demanded of secondary school leavers, ensuring that they would be 'marketable' enough to enter any higher learning institution or even pursue a job. Remarkably, these soft skills were hardly appreciated until about six years ago. How times have changed!

Today, the abilities to engage society, contribute towards charitable efforts, communicate with people, and develop innovative ideas have become the new benchmarks to measure a youth's employability and entrepreneurial skills. All

these can be inculcated during our educational years.

Since graduating from secondary school, I have been one of the finalists in the 2008 AYA Dream Malaysia Most Outstanding Youth Award, been invited by Harvard University for its Asia Business Conference, won multiple global business student championships, and played a part in developing the community of youth entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

During my days at INTI College Penang, I took up various youth leadership roles, chaired various clubs, and became the president of the Student Government. It was not easy managing major events and leading a large body of students. Still, I encourage school leavers to embrace the opportunity to be peer representatives and serve as a stepping stone in creating a positive impact. As leaders, they will learn to think of others before themselves.

Subsequently, I spearheaded the college's event management division and pioneered reality events for students, during which I took the opportunity to give back to my college. Through events like Alternate, not only were students drawn away from their classroom environment, they also underwent personal development. I also organised DiGi Street Blast, the largest youth festival in Malaysia at the time. The coordination of the 10,000-strong crowd that night taught me resourcefulness. Through these events, I learnt that youths can achieve anything they want, as long as they have the confidence and passion to do so.

After my stint with youth entrepreneurship, I pursued my degree in marketing and international business in New Zealand, during which I took the opportunity to lead the Students in Free Enterprise business organisation, and organised various community projects. The network of talents, business contacts, and communities I engaged with strengthened my belief that it is not only what you know, but who you know and who knows you in return that makes a difference!

One of the many unique experiences I had was distributing flyers on the streets to supplement my living expenses. Being alone and separated from my beloved country, family, and friends, I made it a personal goal to be a respected representative of Malaysia and my countrymen, something which I

believe all Malaysian students can and should do while pursuing their studies overseas.

With strong support from family and friends and the ‘*Malaysia Boleh!*’ spirit, I won numerous business competitions, enabling me to fly to many parts of the world including New York, Singapore, and Hong Kong. I never imagined that I would have the chance to consult huge companies like Deloitte, Citigroup, and Ocean Park in our competitions. Upon achieving that, I realised that youths possess limitless potential, but the realisation of that potential hinges upon whether we are confident enough to showcase it.

Today, I speak to youths on ways to further develop by sharing my humble experiences with them. I also consult businesses on strategies that would make them more effective and responsive toward the youth market. Through my work, I also aim to share my late grandfather’s principles. The first is to be patient but persistent, while the second is to look at the silver lining amid adversity. His values, I believe, are even more relevant for youths today than they ever were.

We have reached the end of my story, even many others set out on the beginning of theirs. Share and share alike – after all, it is my personal belief that a story is not worth anything if it is kept in secrecy. If a story is inspiring, and puts a smile on one’s face, then it is a story worth telling.

The first is to be patient but persistent, while the second is to look at the silver lining amid adversity.



Of Two Paths

Michelle Chong Suit Yin, 19, is a scholar of Advance Tertiary College, and she will be graduating from A-levels, Arts in June after a delay of almost two years. A person of varied interests, including adding new languages to her arsenal, she used to teach English/Literature part-time to ease financial constraints.

Take my hand and allow me to unravel my tale as I attempt to guide you along this brief transition in your life. I present to you my story – unflattering to yours truly perhaps, but certainly unvarnished.

I was a bright student in elementary school. Due to various circumstances, I did not receive adequate education during my high school years, and my grades suffered drastically as a result. My parents had high hopes for me, and they suggested that I become a pharmacist. It was then that I had to choose between the two paths laid down for aspiring youngsters by the educational system.

My science and mathematical abilities were pathetic squiggles in my brain. On the other hand, I enjoyed languages, linguistics, and everything artsy, though I must admit that does not quite have the ring of ‘sugar, spice, and everything nice’. I chose the science route eventually, simply because it was generally believed to be ‘more lucrative’. My parents assured me that as I was a bright girl in primary school, I would definitely be able to catch up if I put more effort into my work. Therefore, although I was actually indifferent

towards science, I entered A-levels Science with my heart set on becoming a pharmacist.

You would think that was the end of it and I became a successful Pharmacist. But life is not as simple as the fantasy world of indulgence, and trains do not always run along your ideal tracks. In a nutshell, I soon realised that I was out of my depth. The internal struggle within me was simply unbearable. As a hawker's daughter, I had hoped to forge a better life for my beloved family and myself by taking the well-worn and seemingly more 'beneficial' path of science. My parents never forced me into it, of course; they were merely in favour of it, as it would have meant a 'better life' for me.

After much deliberation, I eventually concluded that I would have been better off in the Arts stream. I hesitantly walked back to the original crossroad where I had once stood upon a year and a half ago, tears of frustration and fear flowing down my face. I went the other way this time; A-levels, Arts. I wish I could say that from that day onwards, I never looked back. But truth be told, I have cast a couple of longing glances in the other direction.

Nevertheless, I made it – quite successfully, if I say so myself, despite having been in the science stream at high school without any foundation in Arts and a delay of almost two years after SPM. I am currently hoping to pursue a degree in English Language/English Literature. My brief venture into the science route has not been wasted, and I have learnt many valuable lessons during my struggle to decide between both paths. I realised that in trying to make everyone happy, I had neglected my own happiness. Consequently, I have adopted an attitude of semi-indifference, where I rarely do things merely for the sake of gaining the general public's approval. They are of no relation to me, so why should I be afraid to admit my mistakes for fear of embarrassing myself? People worth your attention will respect a forthright attitude, and if they do not respect you for the person you are, chances are their opinion does not really matter.

I now pose this question to you, reader – what do you want in life? During my indecision whereupon I stood at the crossroads for a second time, I became conscious of the fact that I will be satisfied with a roof over my head, clothes

on my back, and three square meals a day – something that a teaching career would be able to give me. Success in life is what you make it out to be, and happiness is to gain satisfaction from the simple things. He who is never satisfied will suffer more self-induced anguish even if he holds the world in the palm of his hand, in comparison to the simple peasant who wears a happy smile induced by simple pleasures like warm sheets.

Admittedly, I do sometimes feel that I was ultimately destined to be a Science person, rather than an Arts one. There is a fine line between both paths, and it is merely necessity that separates the entanglement of knowledge between Science and Arts. The science path is one that I may return to at a later time for the fun of it, if I am so inclined. But for now, languages and linguistics are my life's calling, and I made the choice by following my heart.

“Does the walker choose the path, or the path the walker?” – Garth Nix

*Success in life is what you make it out to be,
and happiness is to gain satisfaction from
the simple things.*



Mad about Ads

Michelle Tam Li Peng, 22, is pursuing a communications degree from the University of South Australia. A believer of dreaming big and living well, this bibliophile enjoys both consuming and creating media, serving the community, and going on ad hoc adventures.

Advertising is one of the many boons and banes of our existence. While it serves to create awareness about a particular product, it can sneakily seduce you into buying something you hardly need.

I should know – I have always been mad about ads. I love how they have evolved with the times; these days, they go beyond products, and sell you beliefs. Thanks to the late Yasmin Ahmad's festive season fare for Petronas, choosing to fuel your car with the national petroleum brand almost feels like a vote for national unity. Years on, most of us still remember her very first Merdeka offering, 'Little Indian Boy': the nostalgic ad about a child, wide-eyed in wonder at the sheer magic of our very first Independence Day, has softened many a hardened heart.

But I digress. Short stints in The Star's (highly recommended) young journalist program, BRATs, satiated my journalistic bent for a while. Seeing my occasional byline in a leading local daily made my heart skip a beat, and one of my uncles even joked about me being the family's Christiane Amanpour! Alas, international correspondent dreams aside, I was still awestruck by the advertising industry. A fascinating class on the subject only served to heighten

its allure; I had to find out if it was my calling.

So I took the plunge, and applied for an internship at the local branch of an international advertising agency during my summer holidays. The friendly Account Manager told me to come in on Monday morning, and I was beside myself with glee.

Indeed, my Don Draper adventure was off to a good start. Only, unlike the *Mad Men* protagonist, I was no Creative Director. As an intern in the Accounts Servicing department, I had to observe how the account executives liaised with clients and conveyed their needs to the Creative department.

After a weekend of rigorous reading and researching, I arrived at work all bright-eyed and bushy tailed. My supervisor showed me to my desk after a short briefing, and I was left to learn from the other interns while I waited for work to come in. And boy, did it pile on quickly!

“Prep the deck for account X, and contribute to that suit’s corridor check!”

A lingo mysterious to most, perhaps, but a steady intake of advertising culture through my lessons and television shows helped me understand the rapid-fire instructions from my colleagues. PowerPoint presentations are ‘decks’, clients are ‘accounts’, account executives are ‘suits’, and lightning quick opinion gathering sessions are ‘corridor checks’.

My communications background served me well, for I had to critically analyse hundreds of advertisements. Extensive editorial experience also proved useful when I had to provide exact transcripts or succinct versions of the copy. Previous film and broadcasting classes helped when I had to edit videos, frame by frame, to describe the shots used and include subtitles. A colleague who had trouble with unusual file formats was ecstatic when I got his advertisements correctly converted, subtitled, and edited in under half an hour!

My days passed by in a productive blur, for my surroundings were a whirlwind of activity. The office was constantly abuzz with calls to and from Vietnam, India, and the United States, to name a few. Clients emanating power and easy confidence sauntered through our offices on a regular basis – once, when representatives from one of the world’s largest automobile manufacturers dropped by to hear our pitch for their account, the atmosphere was electric

with excitement!

Interns were treated with respect – no coffee making drones here – but if any failed to deliver assignments on time, none were spared from a dressing down in spectacular fashion. In an industry where the stakes are high, perfection and professionalism are highly prized.

Above all, I learnt that both everything and nothing I knew about advertising was true. Yes, the pay is excellent, and the people kooky, creative types. But it was not all glitz and glam; immaculately dressed executives gliding cool and calm across the glossy floors could run helter skelter when the occasion called for it. I remember the deafening din of high heels clattering up and down the office as we bubble-wrapped numerous delicate FA (final artwork) at a fast and furious pace for immediate courier to another country. Despite the long hours and painful public commutes to and fro, everyday was an adrenaline rush. Thus, when my internship ended, I left with a heavy heart.

In short, it is imperative that you gain exposure to the industry of your interest to determine if it is worth investing a large part of yourself in. No matter where life takes you after SPM, the classroom can only teach you so much. We are the agents of our fates, and extraordinary experiences everywhere are ours for the taking; all you have to do, my friend, is place yourself right in the eye of the storm.

*We are the agents of our fates, and extraordinary
experiences everywhere are ours for the taking;
all you have to do, my friend, is place yourself
right in the eye of the storm.*



Boxes of Life

Michelle Yoon, 23, completed her SPM at SMK Puteri Ampang, before taking STPM by the horns at SMK Seri Ampang. Having worked while waiting for the results of both major exams, she is now using that money to pay for her tertiary studies in Architecture at UNITEC New Zealand.

My decision to do STPM was one of convenience. I did not know what I wanted to do, and being accepted into Form Six allowed me to just take what was handed to me. Having been in the Science stream in Form Four and Five, the obvious choice was for me to take Chemistry and Biology for STPM.

What came together with this decision was a life I did not expect. I did not expect staying up until four in the morning to cram for a monthly test, and needing to wake up an hour later so that I could beat the traffic and get to school on time. Nor did I imagine that I would be camping outdoors equipped with chemicals, plastic boxes, band-aids, and mosquito repellent in order to catch insects for an assignment.

I had my fair share of depression during the one and a half years of Form Six. Due to sheer exam pressure, I contemplated giving up and joining the workforce. In the end, it was simply my interest in my subjects that kept me going.

Having hated drawing all my life, it came as a surprise to a lot of people when I opted to take up Architecture for my tertiary education. They could

not imagine what had possessed me to choose something totally unrelated to Chemistry and Biology, and instead required me to meet my drawing demons right in the face. You see, I was inspired whenever I went on construction site trips with my dad, who is a construction site manager. It was the joy of seeing things change from 2D into 3D. I found it amazing that people could transform what were initially just lines on paper into buildings of brick and mortar. I saw architecture as a means for me to be part of that process.

I am proud to say that my drawing skills improved somewhat by the final year of my Bachelor of Architectural Studies programme, but without plenty of sweat and tears. Having spent more time in the campus studio than at home or anywhere else, I have learnt that design is not just about drawing extravagant buildings that ignite passion – it is also about making them work. The poetic side of architecture is about aesthetics and how we can integrate beauty and elegance into a working structure. The other side to architecture deals with social aspects, namely our impact on the community, law and contracts – where we deal with clients and legislation – and technology, which is currently focused on sustainable designs.

To me, Architecture is about going crazy in the beginning, and then making sense of the nonsensical at the end. For example, there was this project where we were only told to make paper sculptures. We had to cut, tear, scrunch up, fold, or do whatever that could be done to paper, without any preconceived idea of what it might end up as. We then took the paper sculptures we made and turned it into a concept for an exhibition space. For us to come up with something amazing and out-of-this-world, we had to go crazy before settling down to make sense of what we had created.

Architecture is a field that cannot be mastered without a certain level of interest in it. As my lecturers would say, architecture is about being obsessed over the little details. It is about waking up in the middle of the night just to pencil out a concept that you saw in your dream. It is about forgetting to eat and sleep and brush your teeth. It is about loving what you do. It really is about what you want out of life, and studying architecture has given me this very valuable lesson.

So once again, it will come as a surprise to those around me when they learn of my decision not to pursue architecture as my life's career. This is because the most important lesson that I obtained from learning architecture was that to be successful, one has to constantly think out of the box.

The 'boxes' that I have chosen thus far have been boxes of convention and convenience. I made decisions based on what was expected of me, by family, friends, and society. To think outside these boxes, I started actively looking elsewhere for the spark that would ignite my passion, and found it in the form of blogging.

While my future plans are open to change, I am more inclined toward social issues and the media industry, as that is where my passions lie. Blogging about political and social issues for the past year has become a large part of my present life that I cannot imagine a life without sticking my nose into issues that matter to me. And it is precisely the 'I cannot imagine life without...' part that is the essential ingredient in ultimately choosing what to do.

And if anyone reading this is as indecisive as I am, it is all right. Choosing one path over another does not close all other options. The choices out there are like stars in the sky – you just cannot count them.

*And it is precisely the 'I cannot imagine life without...'
part that is the essential ingredient in ultimately
choosing what to do.*



Placards from the Edge

Mien Lor, 29, make films to appease the ghost of desires, run trainings on human rights and filmmaking in exchange for a place to sleep and the raw fish fix. She has been doing this since she was 24; however, she believes age is irrelevant.

Demonstration at Putrajaya.

Sometime in October.

Noon. Putrajaya.

Position: Volunteer for KOMAS

Job Task: Document the demonstration against the Goods and Service Tax (GST) and the handover of a memorandum

“No GST! No GST!” the line of 15 people chanted, holding their placards firmly in front of them. The placards, with scrawls of blue and red, read “Goods and service tax?!?”, “GST makes the poor pay more!”, and “We don’t want GST!” Some reporters were clicking away on their long SLR lenses. Fifty feet away, three policemen observed the crowd as they stood beside two police cars.

The community representatives from the estate arrived this morning, some in vans, some in their own taxis, some from Kajang, and some from as far as Ipoh. It took them a while to find the Minister’s Building in the vast, deserted Putrajaya. The afternoon sun beat down on the demonstrators, yet they stood and waited.

Like the policemen, I too was observing the crowd, but with my digital video camera. Unlike them, however, I was with the people. I was there on a volunteer assignment for KOMAS. It was my first time documenting a demonstration for them; part of KOMAS' work is to provide video and photographic documentation support for communities. As a video student, holding the camera was pretty easy; witnessing an actual demonstration, away from the safety of the TV screen, was not.

The demonstrators consisted mainly of mothers, grandfathers, and young workers from the estate; very friendly people, especially when they know you are on their side. It was the people standing 50 feet away that I was more concerned about. Recalling news clips from CNN depicting police throwing punches, waving batons and shoving shields at demonstrators made me cringe. As I threw glances at the policemen to make sure they were still where they were and not any closer, I wondered what was it that made us stand on different sides.

This event was organised by a human rights organisation – SUARAM, represented by Arul Chelvan, who wore a simple t-shirt that sat a little too snugly on his teddy bear frame. Someone from the Minister's department eventually came out an hour later. Arul strode over with a smile to meet the man who wore a suit, a tie, and a serious face.

Steadying my video camera, I shot the memorandum, which carried many NGOs' and communities' endorsements on it. I followed, or rather, my video camera followed the two men. The man from the Minister's office finally agreed to set up a meeting between five representatives from the community and his superior, who sits up there in the office of the tall building. My video camera again followed the smaller convoy through the glass panel entrance and towards the elevator, until another man in a suit told me that no press was allowed from there onwards. The elevator door closed in my face, and my camera's.



Some of my most impactful post-SPM work has been with KOMAS, a local community communication centre that supports and trains grass-root communities and NGOs in the utilisation of popular communication tools. Initially a volunteer, I officially joined KOMAS as a staff member on December 8, 2004.

I like films and videos, and I want to serve communities, so KOMAS was the perfect marriage of both. Among other experiences, I documented the humanitarian work undertaken by medical personnel in Aceh after the December 26 tsunami and the work of PERMAS – an NGO consisting of representatives from urban poor communities and community organisers – in Rawang.

My experiences with KOMAS have taught me that ideals are a wonderful beginning, but it is time, patience, persistence, and practicality that will see the ideals through. Above all, SPM leavers, whatever your dreams are, do it now, do not wait for tomorrow. We do not know if we have tomorrow, but we definitely have today.

*We do not know if we have tomorrow, but we
definitely have today.*



A Journey towards Equality

Mohamad Alif, 23, hails from Cheras and is a proud member of AIESEC. He completed both his primary and secondary school education in Methodist Boys' School. Currently pursuing his Mechanical Engineering degree at Universiti Malaya, he wishes for a cleaner, greener, and happier Malaysia.

Out of the eight course choices that I had listed in my IPTA application, I was lucky enough to get my first choice – Mechanical Engineering at Universiti Malaya (UM). But to tell you the truth, the fact that I was accepted into UM made me happier than getting my course of choice; UM was a mere 30 minutes drive away from home, not to mention only 15 minutes away from the Midvalley and One Utama shopping malls. I was thoroughly overjoyed and thought to myself, “I am going to be a university student soon!”

The day came when I set foot into the lecture hall of Malaysia’s top public university (or so it claimed). The first thing that struck me was, “Wow, all 91 of the youths taking this course are going to be my coursemates for the next (fingers crossed) four years.”

As the days went by, I started to realise how different university life was compared to secondary school days. Back then, my friends comprised of youths of various races and religions who were conversant in English. But now, only a handful of my coursemates had a decent grasp of English. I wondered how they managed to get into university in the first place. To top it all, there is

a vile thing happening in most public universities – polarisation. No, I am not referring to the colourful polarisation effects that we produce during science experiments, but rather, racial polarisation.

In lecture halls, you could see students sitting with their own cliques, each one easily distinguishable by skin colour, language, and the like. It saddened me to see self-segregation occurring in a country that is so culturally diversified. Do we merely live with other races, or do we live together as many races? Do we accept other races as we would with our own, or do we merely acknowledge their existence as we carry on with our daily lives?

I soon became resentful of the many aspects of local public university education. I hated that our public institutions are cultivating racial polarisation. How do great minds and intellectual freedom develop in a polarised society? I hated that students were too engrossed in their studies, leaving their social and soft skills undeveloped. I hated that public university students were not able to speak proper English. I searched high and low in hopes of finding something that would redeem all the flaws of this institution, and one day, I finally stumbled upon AIESEC.

To me, AIESEC seemed to be the organisation in university that accepted you for who you are, and not because of your race or some other superficial quality. It was where I wanted to be. AIESEC is widely reputed to the world's largest international youth organisation, and is acknowledged by the United Nations for upholding what it envisions, which is peace and fulfillment of human potential. It achieves this by providing youths with three main things: international internship programs, a global learning environment, and leadership opportunities.

The longer I stayed in AIESEC, the more the organisation opened my eyes to the world yonder; a world where people are equal but still unique in their own ways. Now, I am in my third year as an AIESEC member, and am currently leading a multiracial team of wonderful individuals. Together, we are managing an AIESEC Local Chapter in UM with 32 students under us, and we change people's lives through our Exchange Programme, one day at a time. Next semester, I will be in the national committee, working closely

with 10 other individuals from various universities. Together, we will lead an organisation comprising more than 500 members. My experiences in AIESEC taught me how to be a leader and exposed me to a skill that even most adults have yet to master: the skill of managing people, each with their own quirks and idiosyncrasies.

I have come to love this organisation for the simple fact that it does not discriminate. Regardless whether you are Malay, Chinese, Indian, Punjabi, Kadazan or Iban, etc., you will be appreciated for who you are. I have remained a member for so long because it has provided youths like you and I a platform to speak our minds and do great things. I believe I have rediscovered my purpose in life through AIESEC. I found a place that accepts me, or anyone for that matter. So long as learning is the reason you join AIESEC, then learning you shall get.

To me, AIESEC seemed to be the organisation in university that accepted you for who you are, and not because of your race or some other superficial quality.



English Conquers All

Nadiah Wan, 26, graduated in Biochemistry from Harvard in 2007 but ended up as a management consultant in KL. In an effort to expand her horizons beyond those visible from skyscrapers, she is attempting to learn how to use a camera properly and dreams about exotic travel destinations.

One piece of advice I would give to any aspiring Malaysian student is to improve their command of English. From my story, I hope you will see why.

There was nothing special about my upbringing beyond the fact that we spoke English at home. As a product of a multiracial marriage, English was a compromise between two cultures. At school, I entered the pure science stream. I loved history and languages, but saw science as a way of deciphering nature's own language or code. I also actively sought to enter everything from debates to sports meets. I learnt how to speak and present in public and experienced the ragged determination needed to win a long race. When I look back at my schooling years, it was those experiences I cherished the most.

After SPM, I was awarded a PSD scholarship to study in America. For a student who enjoys both the humanities and the sciences, the American education system is perfect as it is flexible and allows students to explore different subjects. At that time, Biotechnology was the in thing and I wanted very much to be part of this exciting new wave. To this end, I even obtained an internship to work in a lab at Universiti Malaya for a few months just to

gain some research experience.

The application process to an American university starts a year before the application is due. The first obstacle is the SAT, which many find difficult due to intricacies of the language and the biasness of the test towards English speakers. Therefore, to succeed, students must be as comfortable with English as any American student would be.

However, SAT scores are not the sole reason for admission into any Ivy League school. Many applicants across the globe have perfect scores. To get the attention of the admissions committee, it is important to show that you are a well-rounded candidate. The extra-curricular activities in high school and the short lab internship enhanced my credentials. The other important feature is the admissions essay. American students spend months writing and proof reading the essay because it is an intimate representation of themselves to the admissions board. As for me, I was lucky to have an English teacher who drilled me on grammar, composition, and writing, as well as my parents who dutifully read and edited all my drafts.

Then there is the interview, which is designed to delve even further into the background of shortlisted candidates. Why choose to study science? Why even apply to this college? What is the greatest challenge you have faced? As you answer these questions, remember that the interviewer is not only interested in your response but also the way in which you speak and carry yourself.

I arrived at Harvard and found that Biotechnology was not offered, so the department head suggested biochemistry instead. I quickly settled in, enjoying the freedom to choose my classes from both the sciences and humanities. Harvard also offered amazing opportunities for undergraduates. Taking advantage of student grants, I spent one summer in Costa Rica learning Spanish while researching the nutritional habits of the indigenous peoples. During the term, I conducted research both in virology at Boston Children's Hospital and at the Harvard Law School Program for Islamic Finance.

In my final summer as a student, I applied for an internship with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) in Kuala Lumpur. Although I loved science, I knew

that lab work was not for me. I am a social person and enjoy interacting with people from different cultures, so my tutor recommended I try management consulting instead. My science training provided me the analytical skills required of a consultant. Strong communication and presentation skills honed in a US-style classroom were an advantage, especially when interacting with clients. In BCG KL, many interview candidates often fail due to their poor command of English. Again, I was lucky that my experiences allowed me to thrive at BCG.

After a successful internship, I was offered a permanent position. Before returning home to work, I spent some time volunteering at a refugee camp in Ghana. My time there gave me insights into politics, healthcare, and socio-economic policy in the complex environment of Africa and made me appreciate Malaysia more.

The sum of my experiences has shaped my work today at BCG where I continue to work on life sciences, healthcare, and public sector projects where possible. Looking back, I realise that I am here today because I took many random opportunities that shaped my personality. But it all would not have been possible if I had not been able to read, write, and speak English well. If you master the language, you will not be afraid to speak up and present your ideas. And when you do, someone out there will hear you and help you succeed.

*If you master the language, you will not be
afraid to speak up and present your ideas.
And when you do, someone out there will
hear you and help you succeed.*



Curiosity Killed the Cat – Not

Nani Abdul Rahman, 28, read Law at Harvard University and International Islamic University of Malaysia. She's proud to be a neo nerd, political junkie, and cat aficionado.

I have always been averse to conforming to conventions and norms, even if I am not innately rebellious. I do not fancy emulating something just because everyone else does – at least, not without first understanding how and why it was propelled to such stature. Many a time, when I was hard-pressed between making a safe conventional choice or taking my chances on what I yearned for, I would be predisposed to the latter.

Indeed, I have not quite trailed the typical path. I spent the better part of my formative life as a minority in the small town of Sitiawan, Perak. I am a kindergarten dropout thanks to my nanny, with whom I colluded. My parents found out after my teacher complained that I had been playing truant. However, there was a valid justification; it was boring to learn the alphabets when I could already read a book. So we struck a deal: I dropped out from the kindergarten to be home tutored after my mother finished work at school.

Another unpopular decision was when I declined an offer from a premier boarding school after PMR. My parents subscribed to opposite views – my dad wanted me to accept it, whilst my mom stood on the contrary. Fortunately, we were governed by simple yet profound household rules: you are free to choose, but others are equally free to influence your thought process through

reasoned discussions. However, once you have decided, you must assume full responsibility of your choice, action, and any ensuing consequences. My parents made their case but I knew what I wanted – diversity with quality education. So I decided to stay in my alma mater, Methodist ACS School.

Despite my decisiveness, the dilemma after SPM remained intense because any ‘mistake’ would have too high an opportunity cost on my future. As a science student with straight A1’s, the community’s perceived logical direction for me was to read medicine in the UK and spend the rest of my life in the service of the weak, the ill, and the dying. Do not get me wrong – serving the community is undoubtedly noble, but it is not the monopoly of medical professionals. There are many career tracks that provide one with ample opportunities to do the same, if not more.

More importantly, it was not what I wanted to do. I turned down what many considered a prized opportunity, and joined the MoE Science Matriculation Programme instead. However, it did not take me long to realize that it was Law that could speak to my inquisitive mind and heart. And it was not just the Common Law – I was extremely curious about the Shariah, given what I had heard of it. However, I wanted to form an opinion about it from my own investigations, not from the stereotypes of a distorted prism. Thus, I left the programme for the International Islamic University of Malaysia where I had every opportunity to examine, compare, and integrate the Common Law with the Shariah in all dimensions.

I enjoyed my days at the university, graduated, and was admitted to the Bar after completing pupillage at Skrine. Yet, I longed to quench my thirst for knowledge and rerouted myself to Harvard Law School for Master of Laws. Interestingly, the beauty of knowledge lies in its dynamic nature. Much can be discovered outside the classroom through observations, interactions, and experimentations.

Hence, during the US Presidential Primaries, I seized every occasion to campaign and attend rallies. I remember weathering the blistering cold in New Hampshire and knocking from door to door to distribute literature, explain how the healthcare system would be fixed, and convince them on why

they should vote. As a Fulbright scholar, I benefited from a brief stay with my foster family in Albuquerque, away from the seemingly perfect life in Boston. Similarly, when I was in the IIUM, rigorous debating and mooted activities blew my mind away.

I finally returned home to honour my scholarship obligation with Khazanah and ended up working in investment, not law. At first, everything was alien, and sometimes frustrating. Nonetheless, when I looked beyond the surface, I realised that there is a striking similarity between the two: fundamentally, both require strong analytical and inquisitive construct. If you have this, you will be versatile for any transition in your career. The rest, you will learn on the job.

In hindsight, I have no regrets with the decisions I have made, as they are humbling yet enriching. In particular, I would like to share two key lessons. First, pursue your dreams and take full responsibility for your choices. Second, selecting the 'right' career is important, but it is even more important to arm yourself with an inquisitive mind that will take you through the unpredictable turns in life. In this context, perhaps curiosity did not kill the cat after all.

*First, pursue your dreams and take full responsibility
for your choices.*



Unfinished Business

Neo Jia Hui, 20, is pursuing Actuarial Science at the London School of Economics in the UK. She was an STPM 2008 National Top Scorer from SMK Sultan Abdul Samad, Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

If, having scored 11 A1's and an A2 in SPM, you are given the option of pursuing your A-levels under the ASEAN Merit Award or the Cambridge A-levels under a full scholarship, which would you choose?

I chose neither. I took STPM instead.

It was not an obvious choice for me. Whenever I told someone of my decision to undertake two years of Form Six, they would give me a strange look or a condescending expression, and then attempt to talk me out of it. Those doubts motivated me to set my aims high. If I were to go through this, I would aim for the best results, i.e. be the national top scorer.

You are probably curious as to why I chose Form Six when I had other available options. Apart from the fact that STPM offers more knowledge in their syllabus than the A-levels and is internationally recognised by prestigious universities in the UK and the US, my reason was simple – I wanted to be more active in co-curricular activities.

Since primary school, I had been placed in classes that emphasised the importance of academic achievements. I remember standing in line waiting to be caned simply because I scored below 80 for a minor test in Standard 3.

In upper secondary school, I was thrown into a competitive pool of students. I held certain major posts, but more than being a team member, I wanted to be a team leader and lead my team through ups and downs.

Therefore, when given the chance to correct this part of my life, I took it. In Form Six, priorities were given to us to hold important posts. I was given the chance I had been craving for. I was elected President of the Science & Mathematics Society, Organising Chairman of the Science and Mathematics Week, and Treasurer for the Prefectorial Board. One of my most memorable experiences involved organising a school trip to the only Forensic Lab of the Royal Police Force. We were shown the technology used to solve crimes. I was surprised when an officer admitted that our technology was five years behind that of the United States!

Such experiences taught me leadership skills and teamwork. They were valuable experiences gained through sacrificing much time and effort, but prepared me for great challenges in the corporate world. Form Six also taught me persistence. I had previously represented my school in a few competitions but had never won. Nevertheless, I did not give up. In Form Six, I took part in a few state-level competitions but once again, Lady Luck was not on my side.

A few months before STPM, the 39th Exxon-Mobil Science Quiz was held at Victoria Institution, Kuala Lumpur. It was my final chance to shine. The competition required a schoolmate and I to answer a series of science-based questions in less than a minute. Frankly, I thought our chances of winning were low; the competition was incredibly stiff as other prestigious schools were also in the fray. In the end, I took it as just another competition, but studied very hard for it because I have always believed that what is worth doing, is worth doing right. And this time, we came in second place!

Through this, I realised that even if opportunities slip us by, there are more waiting for us in the near future, as long as we continue to have faith and remain persistent.

With that said, Form Six was an emotional roller coaster – I was stressed to the limit, trying to find a balance between my co-curricular activities and studies with time constraint being a huge factor. I would be overjoyed when my

efforts produced good results or when a project was accomplished successfully. I felt grateful when my teachers understood my predicament; they never failed to advise us when we had doubts. Thankfully, I also had my share of laughter, because I had a great bunch of classmates to go through the ordeal with.

Form Six will give you the time of your life and the opportunities you missed when you were younger. It is just like rebranding your life the way you want it to be. Wonderful, is it not?

Even if opportunities slip us by, there are more waiting for us in the near future, as long as we continue to have faith and remain persistent.



A Ship Designer's Story

Neoh Wen Keat, 24, is a Penangite who designs ships.

After SPM, he did his A-levels under the ASEAN Pre-University Scholarship in Singapore. He then pursued a degree in Electrical and Electronics Engineering at Nanyang Technological University, graduated last year. Currently working at Keppel Singmarine Pte. Ltd., this shipbuilding designer hopes to return to Malaysia someday.

Firstly, congratulations on completing SPM! Go crazy, have some fun, do things you wish you could have done, meet up with old friends and make new ones, because once reality strikes, there will be choices to make.

There is no correct path to take; everyone makes different choices and what is right for some may not work out for others, so I will just share what I have learnt. I came out fresh from SPM aware of only two choices – STPM and UTM. It did not help having to survive on a dial-up internet connection! As I was at a loss about what to do, many people advised me, saying that pursuing a degree in Actuarial Science would be a platform for building a good career. So I blindly took the Certified Accounting Technician (CAT) at Institut Perkim-Goon (IPG) under a scholarship by The Star newspaper. To this day, I am grateful for the opportunity I had, although I did not complete the course; perhaps I realised my passion did not lie in accounting and numbers. I ended up doing something quite different after taking the CAT and the A-Levels under the ASEAN scholarship in Singapore.

I became a ship designer, and my work helps me to repay my loans and support my family.

Being a ship designer involves interesting and dynamic work. There are always two sides to a coin – and so, similarly, there are pros and cons of working in the marine industry. I will first highlight the positive sides of a job in ship design and construction or, more generally, the marine industry. One thing is for sure: ships are definitely interesting and unique because it is not something common in our daily lives!

So what is the role of an Electrical Engineer in shipbuilding and design? To put it simply, an Electrical Engineer is responsible for all the electrical applications of equipment onboard ships. Almost all of the equipment onboard requires electrical power, so we are responsible for:

1. Making sure there is enough power supply from the generator for the whole ship
2. The correct voltage, phase and frequency of equipment to purchase
3. The cables routing from one location to another, all over the ship
4. Type and size of cables to use
5. Protection of switchboard and equipments from short circuit and electrical fault

Aside from the above job scope, which relates to power, we are also responsible for the alarm monitoring system, navigation and communication system, and all the automation system of the vessel. All of this involves work right from the start of checking the purchasing specification until the onsite termination and testing phase of the project.

Most of the vessels that my company is constructing are specialised and customised work vessels such as tugboats, pipe laying vessels, supply vessels, and just recently, icebreakers.

It is important to remember, however, that working in the marine industry is not suitable for everyone. Similar to other construction industries, shipbuilding work always operates on a very tight schedule and long hours are to be expected because many problems arise along the way and all these issues put progress behind schedule. Working seven days a week is a very common

thing in this industry, and each day begins at the early hour of 7.30 a.m. Imagine waking up at 5.30 a.m. everyday for work – most people would give this job a pass!

Aside from this, shipyards are always located far away at the outskirts of industrial areas, so transportation to work can be a burden. Also, it is important to note that working in the marine industry is not an easy-going, comfortable kind of job, but instead a rather dirty one similar to normal civil construction industries. Health and safety problems are definitely an issue.

So my advice to you would be to review the pros and cons – not just for this job, but also for all other jobs – when making your decision. However, do not fret too much: a job is not something that will last you for a lifetime. Like any path you choose to pursue after SPM, it is only a small step in your life, so be prepared for changes along the way.

*There is no correct path to take;
everyone makes different choices and what is
right for some may not work out for others.*



‘Melancong Meluaskan Pengetahuan’

Ng Eng Han, 23, has studied in the Northeast and Southwest regions in the US as well as Barcelona, Spain and Buenos Aires, Argentina within the past 5 years. He obtained a scholarship to attend United World College-USA for his pre-university studies and is now a rising senior in Dartmouth College, US on a very generous financial aid package.

During my national-type primary and secondary education in Malaysia, I remember writing several essays about travelling, and how teachers said it was important because it enabled one to *meluaskan pengetahuan*, or broaden one’s knowledge. In hindsight, I think I never really knew what that term meant. To me, the concept of how travel could actually *meluaskan pengetahuan* was as foreign a concept as how Malaysia would benefit from globalisation or transparency, both of which were popular topics for factual essays.

Fast-forward five and a half years after SPM, and here I am in the Merino Benitez airport in Santiago, Chile, having just visited a Chilean friend whom I had met while volunteering during a study abroad programme in Barcelona about two years ago. The funny thing is that these experiences in Spain and Argentina came about only because I am studying abroad at a university in Northeast US. In fact, the past five years have been an incredible eye-opening journey as I travelled through 20 countries, lived in five countries across four continents, and met people from over 100 different countries.

One might think that I come from a super-wealthy family. The reality is that I grew up in a household where both my parents were government servants for many years, and would not have been able to send any of their three children to foreign universities for higher education. I also rarely ranked within the top ten in my class, although I did eventually manage to obtain excellent SPM results and achievements in extracurricular activities. After SPM, I applied for several scholarships and was fortunate enough to be awarded a 75% scholarship to study at the United World College-USA (UWC-USA). UWC-USA is one of 12 international boarding schools around the world that focuses on promoting international understanding by bringing students from dozens of countries to live and study together. Although I was offered a full scholarship by the Public Service Department (PSD) to study in Germany, I chose the UWC because I felt it would provide a more enriching learning environment.

That gamble certainly paid off. In UWC-USA, I had an incredible learning experience living together with students from different countries. I also found out that financial aid for international students is widely available there, and every year, many Malaysians manage to secure necessary fundings for tertiary education in the United States. It is the only country in the world where financial aid and scholarships are made available to a large number of international students, something that many Malaysians are still unaware of. After UWC-USA, I gained admission into one of the Ivy League institutions, Dartmouth College, with a generous financial aid package that required me to spend even less than what someone in a Malaysian public university would pay. From food and lodging to health insurance and pocket money for study abroad programmes, Dartmouth handed me everything on a silver platter.

The first reaction people usually have when I relate my experience to them is to tell me that I am really lucky. However, I strongly believe that this road is not at all impossible, and that opportunities are abundant if you know where to look. I have met many Malaysians studying in the United States who have had similar opportunities to pursue their dreams to their hearts' desire, even if they were originally from poor families. All you need is a little bit of luck

and intelligence, coupled with lots of hard work, passion, and initiative, which includes cultivating the habit of searching for information online instead of waiting for scholarships to come to you. That way, you can achieve such great experiences too!

In Argentina, I studied their political history and learnt how they and other Latin American countries also had huge immigration waves in the late 1800s and early 1900s like Malaysia. Yet, they have moved past constantly seeing things through ethnic lenses in order to form their own national identity from these immigrant cultures. And after being exposed to so many different cultures over the past five years, I think I am finally beginning to understand what this abstract concept of *meluaskan pengetahuan* means.

And after being exposed to so many different cultures over the past five years, I think I am finally beginning to understand what this abstract concept of 'meluaskan pengetahuan' means.



Of Medicine, Canoes and a Funny Language

Ng Mei Yee, 22, is currently pursuing a medical degree at the Faculty of Medicine in Hradec Králové, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. Having discovered her passion for medicine at a young age, she often finds herself being put to the test with situations before and after entering the medical field of study.

After graduating from my South Australian Matriculation (SAM) studies at Taylor's College, I spent a long time wondering how I was going to fulfill my dream of studying medicine in a Malaysian-recognised institution.

Why medicine? It may seem clichéd, but I have always been interested in being a doctor. I suppose being part of my school's Red Crescent Society drove my interest further. I love the adrenaline rush when we raced against time to help a victim. Later on, I realised that I wanted to be directly involved in the human healthcare industry because I wanted to do hands-on work and witness the results before my very eyes.

After many obstacles, I found myself questioning if this was the right path for me. However, while on a family trip to a famous Chinese temple in Kuching known for its accurate divination sticks, I was told that if I continued to persevere, I would eventually achieve my goal. My trust in the divination sticks paid off when I checked the BestEd website once more – an agency that was the bridge for three medical faculties in the Czech Republic. When I

studied the conditions for eligibility, I found that they had recently decided to accept SAM students. Without hesitation, I applied and studied hard for the entrance exam. After much waiting, I was offered a place in the course of my dreams!

Now that I have been here for a few years, I am very happy and grateful for the opportunities and lessons this course has granted me. I have had the honour of dissecting the head and neck of a generous donor, practicing blood-withdrawal on my classmates, and to my personal dismay, using rabbits to measure blood pressure directly. This summer, I will also have the chance to study the healthcare system of the Czech Republic for two weeks.

Living in the Czech Republic can be a fun and interesting experience if you open yourself to accepting different people. For instance, my friends hail from all over the world. Not only do we get to learn about each other's cultures and languages, we also have the opportunity to opine on our countries' healthcare systems and expound upon our countries' common health problems with our friends.

There are a number of Malaysians here as it is one of the institutions where government-sponsored students are sent to pursue medical degrees, and we meet frequently. My cooking skills have improved considerably as many Malaysian friends here are chefs in their own right. I also needed to satisfy my cravings for Malaysian food!

My faculty also offers sports and activities like canoeing, basketball, swimming, and belly dancing. The natural surroundings in this country are breathtakingly beautiful, leading me to participate in canoeing during my first year. It was during this time that I had the most encounters with Czech students. It was hilarious – we were trying to communicate to each other with my broken Czech and their minimal English. My earnest canoeing instructor, who could not speak a single word of English, mostly used international sign language to direct me!

I have compulsory practical lessons and seminars every day of the week. A plus point of studying here is that during anatomy practicals, we get to deal with plastic models as well as cadavers. This is something I am very grateful

for because studying real bodies makes a lot of difference in understanding the human anatomy; it becomes the basis of our physiology and pathophysiology studies. In the second year, as a complement to our Basis of Patient Care subject, we will be assisting with hands-on work on real patients, such as inserting a urethral catheter or performing an enema.

Our faculty also collaborates with Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota and each year, a selected number of students from their third year onwards have the chance to spend their summer doing a research of their interest in Mayo Clinic. As part of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA), a great number of research internships, summer schools, and community work opportunities are also available to those interested.

The exam system here is oral-based, and we pick our own exam dates. It is during this period that each of us goes through not just a test on our knowledge of what we have studied, but also a test of faith in our own abilities, and whether we want this enough to follow through.

So if you have the passion to pursue medicine, all the best to you! If you are ever in doubt about whether you have the right characteristics to be a doctor, medical school is probably the best time to find out what you lack and develop your skills.

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Lover of the Language

Nuruljannah Bte Hj Usop, 23, is currently pursuing English Linguistics and Literature at International Islamic University of Malaysia after completing her SPM at SMK Merbau and St. Columba. She harbours great dreams, and hopes that her poems and stories will be published someday.

Honestly, I was never a top student. I am no Einstein; instead, I am just your regular girl-next-door. Some people around me have regarded my academic track record with condescension. You see, my certificate was not adorned with A's, but with B's and C's. To be more precise, I only got three A's. Still, the lack of encouragement never killed my dreams of being a lecturer and a freelance writer.

One of my favourite subjects is English Literature. I especially love the subtle yet eloquent beauty of symbolism in the English language. I enjoy unravelling messages that are meticulously embedded in poems, and marvel at how enchanting words can be. Furthermore, literature is one of the most interesting ways to learn history. Frankly, I disliked history, but my passion for literature rekindled my interest in the subject. For example, Queen Elizabeth I's poems depict how her desires and spontaneity were suppressed by the social norms and rigid English social system that surrounded her. I was truly enthralled by the works of writers and poets and how deftly they imbued their stories and poems with symbolism.

So when I received my acceptance letter for the English Linguistics and Literature course at the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), I was absolutely overjoyed. Yet, detractors who had a very narrow view of my choice questioned me. They believed that career prospects were all that mattered in deciding which course to take up, and that pursuing literature did not offer many career options apart from being a teacher.

In response, I smiled and turned a deaf ear. If you are really passionate about something, you will not let others influence your decision; after all, you know where your heart lies better than anyone else. Regardless of how unusual or uncommon the pathway you have decided to take is, give yourself the chance to at least give it a try. I chose this path because of my infinite love for literature. Thankfully, my parents accepted my decision with open hearts and open minds. If your parents object to your decision, do try to persuade them in a polite manner.

Life is not a bed of roses. I have encountered my fair share of obstacles in the course of pursuing my degree. You see, I rarely spoke English with anyone for fear of making mistakes. In addition, I often paused in between speaking and some people thought I had a strange accent. It did not help that most of my classmates were really superb at communicating in English. Hence, I always depended on my notes when it came to presentations in class.

I also received discouraging remarks from some lecturers. Once, one of them said to me, "Your English is poor!". Instead of feeling disappointed with myself, I regarded her words as a source of motivation for self-improvement. I tried communicating with my siblings in English, and despite their constant criticism, I learnt a lot and improved my command of the language. As James Joyce once said, "Mistakes are the portals of discovery."

As for my studies, there were times when I received critical marks, especially for Arabic, a compulsory subject and the fundamentals of which I am not strong in. I told myself I could do it, and subsequently doubled my efforts and consulted my lecturers in spite of my poor communication skills. In the end, I managed to pass and my results have improved greatly over the past semesters.

Contrary to popular belief, my English Literature course is not only

about learning Shakespeare's masterpieces – it also delves into history and society. Furthermore, it has subjects like Novel and Short Stories, Drama, Romantic and Victorian, Poetry, American literature, etc. For instance, one of my favourite subjects, English Twentieth Century and Contemporary, mainly addresses female oppression, war poetry, and the like. In addition, the subject requires us to read two novels, which are *A Room With A View* by E.M Forster and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. Both novels discuss society's rigidity and the paucity of freedom that women face.

Besides that, I have also learnt a lot in this university as I am not only taking English, but also Islam, Arabic, and Human Sciences, all of which have enabled me to be a well-rounded person. I have held onto my dreams in spite of the negative perception some people have of my course, and I fully intend to pursue my master's degree and PhD.

Simply put, if you think you will succeed in your path of choice, you will. After all, the mind is a powerful mechanism. Once you have set a firm, positive decision in your mind, it will take you to where you want to go.

Once you have set a firm, positive decision in your mind, it will take you to where you want to go.



I Would (not)

Ong Kian Ming, 35, is torn between being a hopeless romantic and a hardheaded pragmatist. He hopes that he will lead an exciting and fulfilling life with his wife when they go back to Malaysia after getting his head permanently damaged.

I had it all figured out. At 23, I had a first class honours degree from the London School of Economics and a Masters from Cambridge. I was going to work at one of the most prestigious management-consulting firms in the world. After two years, I would get my Masters in Business Administration from a top-notch business school, probably Harvard University or the University of Chicago, and be made partner before I turned 35.

Two years later, I was told that I was not cut out for management consulting.

I faced two broad options. The first was to continue my corporate career and look for a job in banking, a multinational corporation, or another management consultancy. The second was to pursue a career in political research. The former was safer and more financially attractive, while I had no idea where the latter would lead me. Perhaps it was the stubbornness (or stupidity?) of youth that pushed me to choose the latter, and it became the second best decision of my life after asking my wife to marry me.

One month after I got a job at an MCA-affiliated think-tank, I was in Washington DC with former DAP assemblyman Lim Guan Eng, watching an NBA game featuring Michael Jordan! This was after I attended a conference

where he debated with Khairy Jamaluddin and the late Adlan Benan Omar.

I also managed to get myself involved in a project on electoral reform in Malaysia at IKMAS, a social science research centre at UKM. Sponsored by the Fredriech Naumann Foundation, the project allowed me to meet some of the most prominent political scientists in Malaysia including Francis Loh, Noraini Othman, Khoo Boo Teik, Mavix Puthuchearu, and Lim Hong Hai. We had some very meaningful discussions on electoral systems and electoral reform in Malaysia!

At present, I am completing my PhD thesis at Duke University, confident that many other interesting life and career experiences await me.

If someone had told me that at 34, I would be pursuing my PhD instead of driving around in a BMW Z3 back in Malaysia as partner in a management consultancy, I would have laughed in disbelief. Yet here I am, a better person now because of the career choice I made. If I had stayed on in the corporate world, I would not have gained the variety of experiences that I did.

I would not have been invited to blog about Malaysian education matters by a friend, Tony Pua, who would later become the assembly person for Petaling Jaya Utara (visit the blog at www.educationmalaysia.blogspot.com).

I would not have mingled with so many Malaysian politicians of all stripes and from various parties, as well as social and religious activists from diametrically opposite ends of the political sphere (from ABIM leaders to pro-gay rights activists).

I would not have had the opportunity to specialise in a niche area of political science (malapportionment and gerrymandering) in the Malaysian context which few others have studied in great detail.

I would not have gotten to know the 'Southern' culture and way of life in the United States as well as I did.

I would not have witnessed a match-winning last second half-court shot by a Duke basketball player at the Cameron Indoor Stadium.

I would not have had lunch with Reverend Samuel 'Billy' Kyles, the last person to see Dr. Martin Luther King alive, or been able to worship at his predominantly African American church, the Monumental Baptist Church, in

Memphis, Tennessee.

I would not have flown in a Navy airplane, landed on the USS Kittyhawk somewhere in the South China Sea, and experienced the pressure of a 'slingshot' takeoff from the same aircraft carrier.

I would not have driven from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, through Yellowstone National Park, and to Bozeman, Montana, where I had my 'A River Runs Through It' moment.

Often, the reward for taking the path less travelled is not monetary but experiential. Most people will not have a clear idea of their future immediately after SPM. And even if they think they do, as was the case for me, life comes along and changes one's priorities and aspirations.

One of my favourite lines from a great movie goes, "What we do in life echoes in eternity." While most of us will not be placed in a position to make decisions that will affect hundreds or thousands of people, what we can do is seek experiences. Experiences that inspire us to do our part in ensuring that our actions do touch others in small ways, with the hope that the impact of these acts will indeed echo in eternity. Now, surely that is something to aim for after finishing SPM?

*Often, the reward for taking the path less travelled
is not monetary but experiential.*



Making my Own Way

Ong Vin Nie, 21, is an enthusiastic Girl Guide who attended SRJK Choong Wen and SMK Sri Sentosa before winning the Sime Darby, Central Bank, and Taylor's World Class scholarships. She is a sophomore majoring in Economics at Stanford University under the Central Bank scholarship.

My parents decided that I should take up Form Six; having been discouraged by the failure of people we knew to obtain scholarships abroad, they believed that my chances of obtaining a full scholarship would be similarly impossible.

Our family's total income was too much to qualify for PSD's guaranteed scholarship, which in my year catered mostly for those with family incomes of RM1,500 and below, but neither could we afford private education. Most parents facing a similar conundrum would have taken a bank loan for their children's education, but I did not want my parents to fork out their life savings.

I used to think that my poorly informed family did not sufficiently expose me to the opportunities available out there. Why was I the only child who fielded questions at a career talk while my parents went to the adjacent shopping complex? Why was I not sent to a private or top school? Yet in hindsight, my environment helped me become a more independent person. After all, you are what you make of your circumstances. For all I know, I could have ended up in a top convent school, but at the expense of my ability to speak my mother tongue. Even if my parents were highly informed Ivy League graduates, I could

have become too comfortably complacent, spoon-fed the whole way.

The need to be able to stand on my own feet and the independence that I learnt from my upbringing later led me to pursue some activities that would shape my student experience. For one, I received the opportunity to pioneer the Queens Guide Movement in Kuala Lumpur and eventually represent the Malaysian Girl Guides in an international seminar attended by youth leaders from 16 different countries. Through trial and error, I also learnt to lead the Interact Club in my district, participate in Chinese debates, poem recitation competitions, and youth camps in Taiwan. In the end, what really mattered most in my journey was not where I studied, but how I made use of the opportunities available to me.

When it came time to choosing my after-SPM option, I applied the same principles of industriousness to reaching my goal of later attending a top university. I took initiative in attending various 'Open Day' events held by colleges, researched education resource sites such as the now defunct TinKosong.com, Recom.org, and emailed career counsellors as well as students for information. One valuable thing I learnt: when in doubt, never hesitate to ask a stranger who has been through it before.

Besides that, I also applied for numerous post-SPM scholarships and made a list of post-STPM scholarships in case I had to do STPM. Eventually, I won three scholarships, took up the Central Bank's offer, and was sent to INTEC to pursue their American pre-university program. It turned out that my parents were mistaken. It was possible for me to obtain a full scholarship, and I am glad that I had the guts to find and pursue that chance for myself.

In essence, never leave things to chance, for we are responsible for our own future. Do not be afraid to approach people and enquire politely as you have nothing to lose. Very importantly, never concern yourself with your studies alone to score only a string of A's. This rings true for most scholarships, as you will not even qualify for the interview round without significant extracurricular achievements. As such, pick activities you are interested in and could benefit from during your high school years. The experiences, confidence, communication and team-playing skills that you pick up will distinguish you

from the rest.

As for typical Chinese-educated students, humility is a virtue. Still, we must know when to 'market' ourselves when deemed fit. Opportunities are never conferred, they are created. Hence, as long as we do not give up, we will find our own way to our dreams.

Opportunities are never conferred, they are created.

NOT FOR SALE



A Kelantan Girl's Tale

Pang Siew La is currently in the American Degree Foundation Programme at INTEC. She has nothing to share except for a very humble story, which she hopes will motivate someone who shares a similar background with her to do better in his or her life.

If you asked me to tell you a story about myself, this is how it would begin.

A small-town girl from Kelantan had been hoping for a scholarship to study overseas after obtaining excellent results for SPM. However, she did not receive any during the first period of selection. She then went through many hurdles and obstacles before starting her new life at the International Education Centre (INTEC) as a student in their American Degree Foundation programme.

The Public Service Department had offered me a scholarship after my appeal, and I was thrilled. However, upon realising that I would have to be sent to the US to complete my studies, I wondered if I should instead continue my studies at the Pahang Matriculation Centre, a college I had entered after quitting Form Six.

My parents advised me not to make any impulsive decisions. After all, it was my tertiary education. They wanted me to be what I wanted to be, to do what I wanted to do. On the other hand, most of my friends were advising me to take the scholarship. At last, after much consideration, I decided to take up the offer.

As Randy Pausch said, “The brick walls are there for a reason, they are not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something.” And so I learnt that I should work harder and not wallow in any more dissatisfaction. In other words, I had to be responsible for all my decisions and face the consequences resulting from those decisions.

Before I received news about the scholarship, I had dried all the tears caused by rejection upon rejection from countless scholarship providers. When my friends, relatives, and teachers asked me where I intended to further my studies, I went blank.

What did I say to them? I told them that if I were fortunate enough to secure a scholarship, I would go for it. However, if I did not have such luck, I would continue in the matriculation course I had entered. They were impressed by my response and did not question me further. I am grateful to those who cared and worried about me because I realised that without their support, I would not have known who I am today. As the saying goes, “A problem shared is halved. A joy shared is doubled.”

While recovering from my disappointment, I realised the importance of friendship regardless of creed and colour. Nurul Hedaayah binti Mohd Hilmi, my academic rival and best friend, is now pursuing her studies at Management of Science and Technology University. She always gives me useful advice, sees my strengths, and encourages me in my pursuance of a successful engineering career someday.

She once told me, “I think God is fair and understanding. He failed you in the first selection process because you chose Pharmacy, which I think is unsuitable for you. However, He gave you the chance to pursue your studies in Engineering, which I think is the right path for you. You are good in Mathematics and Physics, and I wondered why you picked Pharmacy as your first choice.”

Her words made me contemplate why I chose Pharmacy in the first place. To this day, I still do not know the answer and I hope it stays that way. Had I had figured out why, I might change my mind and give up what I have been

working so hard for.

Hedaayah, the future doctor, always tells me that she will be by my side no matter which path I opt for in the future. Although the both of us have different dreams, we always support one another. At the time, I wished I had been offered the same preparation centre as hers. Nevertheless, I console myself by saying that friends are mere travellers in our lives.

To me, my life without turbulent periods would have become dull and dark. I have learnt a lot from adversity and I will always make sure that history does not repeat itself. And for now, I am happy and grateful with life in INTEC and all that I have.

*I have learnt a lot from adversity and I will always
make sure that history does not repeat itself.*



Destination: Singapore

Pang Sze Fei, 25, took A-levels at Temasek Junior College, and is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Aerospace Engineering studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore under the ASEAN Scholarship. He has a keen interest in languages and is currently learning German and Korean.

After SPM, like many of my peers, I wanted to further my studies abroad. As I was interested in going to the Technische Universität München (Technical University of Munich, TUM), I opted for Engineering in Germany while applying for scholarships.

At the same time, my teachers recommended that I apply for the ASEAN Pre-university Scholarship to do my A-levels in Singapore. After I was shortlisted, I went for the selection test in KL. To my surprise, I was offered a scholarship to study in a Singaporean Junior College (JC).

While my other friends spent their time working or enjoying their extended holiday after SPM, I found myself going back to school barely a month after SPM ended. It was quite a change for me, as the medium of instruction switched dramatically to English – Mathematics and Science subjects were still taught in Malay at that time – and I suddenly found myself living in a big city. Furthermore, I had to compete not only with Singaporeans, but also with other scholars from Southeast Asia, China, and India. However, it was a great experience, and I developed a competitive spirit.

JC life was enjoyable; the teachers were very dedicated, and the co-curricular activities were conducted professionally. I joined the school choir, and we had an external choir conductor who trained us and accompanied us to competitions. I also learnt that my development as a person was just as important as the certificate I would receive. Emphasis was placed on the cultivation of leadership, organisational, and communication skills. During my time in JC, students were encouraged to be entrepreneurial and to take calculated risks.

After the A-levels, I applied for Singaporean scholarships (including the ASEAN Undergraduate Scholarship) as well as for enrolment into Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS). I was eventually offered the ASEAN Undergraduate Scholarship to study Material Science in NUS or Aerospace Engineering in NTU, and I opted for the latter.

Contrary to popular belief, Aerospace Engineering is not all rocket science, and no, we are not trained to be pilots. It is actually a combination of Aeronautical Engineering (dealing with aeroplanes, helicopters etc.) and Astronautical Engineering (rockets etc.). However, Aerospace Engineering in Singapore focuses more on the latter. It is important for one to have a strong interest in the aviation field, be it civil or military, before considering Aerospace Engineering in NTU as students there are the cream of the crop and the competition is tough.

Students are also expected to know a wide variety of flight knowledge (at least at the undergraduate level), which would include different fields such as material science, propulsion, aerodynamics, avionics, flight mechanics, and aircraft structures. Assignments are varied; we have used software to do computational fluid dynamics (CFD), built a model glider out of wood, and drafted a proposal for a regional plane.

Apart from the usual assignments, we are also encouraged to participate in external competitions. One such competition that my friends and I took part in was the inaugural Airbus “Fly Your Ideas” (FYI) competition, where we had to come up with an idea that could help reduce carbon emissions

in the aviation industry. Although we did not make it to the final round in Paris (only 5 teams worldwide make it that far), we were one of the 86 teams worldwide that managed to progress to the second round. We also gained a lot of insight on aviation through our own research and discussions.

As for the job opportunities after graduation, some of my peers have landed jobs with companies in the aviation field such as Pratt & Whitney, while others are working in more research-based environments such as Singapore's Defence Science and Technology Agency, as well as furthering their studies. There are also others who are now working in the public sector, banking sector, and undergoing management trainee courses.

Also, if you are a hard worker or naturally academically-inclined, you may be able to secure corporate scholarships or other scholarships offered by government ministries or statutory boards in Singapore. However, these scholarships usually require recipients to take up Permanent Residency status in Singapore or even become a Singaporean citizen. If you opt for this path, you may have to give up your Malaysian citizenship.

In a nutshell, Malaysians should consider furthering their education in Singapore. For a small town boy like me, I feel that the time spent in this cosmopolitan city has helped me grow and become a global citizen, in addition to building connections and contacts with people from around the world. After all, the Singaporean culture is similar to our Malaysian life, and this makes the transition into the new, yet somewhat familiar environment much easier.

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The Conundrum of Choice

Philip Loh, 20, loves horses, songwriting, poetry, and design, and attends the Olin College of Engineering. He dreams of leading double lives like Zorro and Batman, whom are principle-driven, honourable rule-benders who may not conform to society's regulations at the necessary times. But sometimes, all he really wants is to defeat the enemy, rescue the princess, get married, settle down, and have kids.

It is not because I am an intern at a political party that I emphasise strongly on choice. However, the converse is true: I have always been a strong proponent of responsible personal choices. Thus, I made the choice to intern with the Democratic Action Party, under Selangor State Assemblywoman YB Hannah Yeoh. Of course, they chose to take me on as well.

Having my personality meant that one would find courage, honour, and nobility great virtues to uphold. I was brought up with liberal doses of Disney motion pictures and other films, and notions of chivalry would always find their way to me: the courage to do what is right amidst opposition, the overarching honour code to abide by whenever the law fails to perform, and the nobility of being a voice for the voiceless and the strength for the weak. Ingrained inside me is a young man who does not mind if the salary sucks (which it does) or if the hours are bad (which they are, but not yet for me) or if the recognition and gratitude from the public seems non-existent at times

(which can be an understatement). I love my job.

I never actually saw myself walking this path. In fact, I never did SPM. Leaving for Singapore under the ASEAN Scholarship after my UPSR dictated that my life would, in many ways, be different from a mainstream student in Malaysia. It also ruled that I would be much less politically aware, especially about the happenings in Malaysia. It is not as if I chose my current path long ago. I was very much an overachiever then, and public service or politics never appealed to me as much as winning awards and competitions. Yet I cannot deny that the little things which Zorro, Robin Hood, and Sir Lancelot taught me have always resided somewhere within me.

When we let our true selves, our passions, and our deepest desires come together, sparks fly. It may be unintentional – serendipitous, even – but it can be seen as wonderfully divine. I sent in my application for the DAP’s “Know an MP” program because I felt that I should play the political awareness catch-up game, having been left out of the loop for six years, and I wanted to somehow contribute back to society at large. There was chemistry from the very first day of my attachment, and I have since grown attached to that office.

Everyone who does something great will have made the choice to be extraordinary and deviate from the mainstream at one point of their lives. For some people (like me), doing it once is not enough. I cannot say that doing secondary school and junior college in Singapore alone – an act of diverging from the mainstream – will have sufficiently guaranteed that I would become extraordinary. After all, life is an aggregate of choices made, among other things. Climate change is an aggregate of choices made, carbon emissions and whatnot. The government is an aggregate of choices made; votes casted, and those that were not. Every decision that may seem minute, unimportant, and insignificant still has the potential to change one’s future, one’s nation, and one’s world.

A few friends have told me that the mainstream thing for a Malaysian to do if he were to pursue tertiary education overseas would be to go to the UK, which obviously practices the British education system, something that Malaysians (and Singaporeans) are very well accustomed to. Those same friends

and others also tell me that many Malaysians who choose to go to the US seem admirably deviant in their own right: star bloggers, overachieving multi-talented individuals, students of fields that do not conform to the traditional perception of an education, et cetera. Thus, I have joined “The US Gang” as a freshman at the Franklin W Olin College of Engineering in Massachusetts (itself a very non-mainstream college).

Maybe it is true that we will end up doing extraordinary things. Watch us. But don't stop there. Join us. Do something different. Do the A-levels in Singapore. Realise your passions. Study in the US. Contribute to society. Intern somewhere. Be chivalrous. Vote and choose responsibly. Or totally ignore all my suggestions. Depart, diverge, and deviate from the mainstream.

Depart, diverge, and deviate from the mainstream.



Live, that you may Dream

Phraveen Arikiah, 20, is currently an A-levels student of Tunku Abdul Rahman College, Kuala Lumpur. He is passionate about writing and aims to become a renowned journalist one day. He is also an aficionado of anything Korean, and simply adores chocolate.

“No!” he declared, sharp and solid.

Such was my father’s reaction when I first informed him of my dream to become a journalist. Not that it surprised me, as my father is a man of opinion; he believed it would be best that I pursue a ‘professional’ career, such as that of a doctor or lawyer. He believed that such occupations were the most secure and lucrative. Of course, this was not exactly a bad thing. Being a parent, he wanted the best for his only child.

However, I wanted to walk a different path – namely, that of a journalist, which thrills me in almost every way. I have always been captivated by how journalists have the uncanny ability to write and present issues as well as opinions in the most intriguing ways. They get to travel, write, and play witness to an array of occasions and experiences. All these, coupled with my intense passion for writing, contributed to the development of my longing to become a journalist. It did not matter if I earned a poor salary, or if there were strict deadlines to meet. The prospect of the job was, and still is, far too interesting to push aside.

There was, of course, my financial predicament. With my mother being a

kindergarten teacher and my father a retiree, there was no way they could fund my tertiary education by their own means. I had to depend on scholarships or a loan.

So I went all out, applying for as many scholarships as I could. Each time I posted an application, I kept my fingers crossed, hoping that Lady Luck would answer my prayers and solve my financial dilemma.

Eventually, I was offered a full scholarship from Tunku Abdul Rahman College (TARC) to do my STPM. At first, I celebrated with glee at the prospect, knowing that the first half of my financial problems had been taken care of. All that was left to do was to work hard and hopefully secure yet another scholarship to pursue my degree.

But the question still presented itself: a degree in what?

I discussed my thoughts with my parents. Part of me was worried that they would cut me off and reject my desire to be a journalist yet again, while the other half of me was eager to explain things to them. Surprisingly enough, my parents no longer objected to me becoming a journalist. In fact, my father was keen on helping me on my way, although he could not afford to send me overseas, he explained that it was the only way to become a successful journalist. I had to find my way once more.

Thankfully, TARC allowed me to switch to A-levels at my request, and transferred my scholarship to fund that course. Although I enjoyed my two weeks of STPM in TARC, as I was studying a highly academic syllabus while enjoying a colourful college life, it is my belief that A-levels is the right stepping stone for me. It will adequately prepare me to pursue my studies overseas as it is more widely recognised worldwide. My father, after some thought, supported my choice of the Arts Stream.

I am currently taking Economics, Business Studies, Accounting, and General Paper. The marriage of these interesting subjects has taught me a great deal and increased my writing competency, as we are mostly given assignments that demand heightened analytical thinking abilities. This knowledge is bound to come in handy when I am at a desk writing for a newspaper someday.

Taking A-levels at TARC has been an immensely enriching (and affordable)

experience. TARC possesses a university-sized and themed campus, with students who not only excel academically, but also in various disciplines. This lends it a sociable and proactive environment. Lecturers are highly knowledgeable, friendly, and very much updated – you would be surprised at how many Facebook users there are amongst the staff! Above all, the college has offered me much more than I had imagined possible, from performing arts to grand-scale sporting events, while honing my skills as a student, and ultimately, as an individual.

At this point in time, I pen this short but rich story, taking note that my dream destination awaits; I am on the way to making my dream a reality. Obstacles and doubt plague my path, but this is my dream. I know for a fact that chasing your dreams will never be quite as easy as ABC. All one can do is to hang in there, and keep fighting.

So let the risks roll in and the hurdles come crashing. I will triumph over them, I will live my dreams. Will you?

*So let the risks roll in and the hurdles come crashing.
I will triumph over them, I will live my dreams.
Will you?*



Enamoured by Engineering

Sandeep Ramakrishnan, 20, is currently pursuing a degree in Electrical and Electronics engineering at Universiti Teknologi Petronas. He would like to remind you that university life only comes once, so have fun while you are at it.

Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP) was where I was headed after SPM. Since I was studying in one of the schools where one's SPM trials results can be used to get a place in UTP, I did not need someone to push me into applying, especially since I was keen on engineering. There are two intakes in UTP, one in January and the other in July. You can also apply once your SPM results are out. I filled up the obligatory forms and mailed them together with my trial results. After a month or so, the letter with the details of my interview – or EDUCamp as it was called – arrived. It was a four-day on campus workshop located in Tronoh, a small town which is about a 30-minute drive from Ipoh.

The workshop covers a few group activities to build confidence and to encourage group work. However, take note that you are constantly being evaluated, so be sure to take part actively. The last two days are reserved for both tests and the interview. While one group is busy solving the IQ test and the English test, another group will undergo their interview. On the next day, the groups swap places. Although there is nothing much I can share about the tests, I can give you some information on the interview. You will be divided into groups of about six people each and provided with a sheet containing

some background information on a particular problem. A recommendation on how to solve the problem will also be provided. However, it is up to you whether you agree or disagree with the recommendation.

Now, to give you a rough idea of what UTP entails. Five different engineering courses, namely Petroleum Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, as well as Chemical Engineering, are offered here. Meanwhile, Petroleum Geosciences, Information Technology, and Business Information Systems are three Bachelor of Technology programs. Students enrolling right after SPM would have to undergo a one-year foundation course, while those from matriculation or Form Six would head straight to undergraduate studies.

For those who wish to study overseas, programmes like the Student Exchange programme and the Student Transfer programmes are the options available. Furthermore, there is a programme where students from any course could choose to further their studies in Australia after a few years in UTP, but on one condition; they would have to study Petroleum Engineering.

UTP has so many different clubs and events taking place every other week, and there are a staggering variety of things to get involved in. I for one am in the UTP robotics society called Petrobots. We take part in various robotics competitions like the ABU-Robocon competition, Eurobot (held in Europe) and Robogamez. Petrobots was formerly known as Robocon as we only focused on the Robocon competition previously. However, we are now taking part in a wider range of competitions. Therefore, I was involved in many research activities.

Through these studies, I was able to apply the knowledge learnt in class instead of merely regurgitating them for the exams. The Engineering Design Exhibition, better known as EDX, is an avenue for students to present their projects and research every semester. Therefore, this is when I present the studies conducted under the Petrobots banner. We would be judged by lecturers based on criterias like the industrial value of the study and presentation skills. Not only was I developing my ability to apply the theoretical facts we learnt in class, but I was also honing my presentation skills.

For community service lovers, the UTP Rotaract group might be the right avenue as the group organises many events to help the community. At the end of each semester, the International Avenue of the UTP Rotaract organises a trip to a foreign country to carry out charity works. In December 2008, the group organised a community service trip to Jakarta, Indonesia. Being a part of it was an eye opener; led by the Indonesian Rotaractors, we visited a school meant for street children, a children's cancer hospital, and took part in a mangrove-planting event to do our part for the environment. The community service trip also allowed me to widen my network of friends from various professions and industries. In short, it has been a great ride for me so far.

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Through a Different Lens

Rachel Au, 21, is currently shivering in Adelaide's snowless winter where she is in her third year of her B.A. in Communication and Media Management at the University of South Australia. She aspires to write a book one day and perhaps save a life as well.

It has been two years since I sat for my SPM – no, I did not get straight A's – and now I am at the University of South Australia (UniSA), Adelaide, in my third year. I transferred here from Taylor's University, Petaling Jaya a few months ago.

Making a good and well-earning living is important, but to do so in a job that I would dread waking up to would not make it enjoyable. In fact, there would be no motivation to excel. That is my belief, and that is the reason I chose to further my studies in the field of communications.

Mass Communication is perceived by many to be an unprofessional field, unlike that of life-saving doctors or hard-grinding accountants. It is also perceived to be a subject that students opt for when they wish to have 'the easy life'. My own family did not fully approve of my choice. Having taken the Pure Science stream in high school, they thought it was a waste that I went down the Arts path for my tertiary education.

When I chose to do the then newly-created Foundation in Communication course at Taylor's University, I knew there would be no turning back. The thing is, I have always been a shy person. Thus, it seemed a little ironic to be

studying a course that mainly revolved around communicating. But that was the magic of it. It taught me to speak up, to voice my opinions, to become a better communicator. Becoming the link between sender and audience made me become more confident in myself.

One of the requirements that came with the course was to organise events – plan it, work with the budget, and make it happen. The School of Communication (SOC) Media Carnival held last year at the Taylor's campus itself was one of them. It was hard work, but it was fun. Departments were formed and everyone had something to do because everyone was a part of it. Being part of the Sponsorship Department had me calling up big companies like Apple and Celcom. It was nerve-wracking at first, until I made more than 50 similar calls. It felt like I was already in the working world, sitting at a desk in an office.

Since transferring to UniSA, things have changed slightly. Perhaps it is the environment that is different, or maybe the standard of education here is higher – whatever it is, going overseas is a completely different experience. I remember entering my first class for Introduction to Film and Television and feeling utterly lost. Almost everyone around me seemed to know everything about cameras. Heck, I did not even know that all those angle and shot names even existed, and that was just the lecture! Setting up the camera during tutorial just to suit the environment flustered me so much that I began to feel discouraged.

One of my assignments was to make a three-minute video that had to be well edited; every movement had to be a smooth transition from one shot to another. I had always been curious as to how movies and television shows turned out they way they did, and now I know. I had not thought of the little details during production, which led to a very stressful editing session that took me two nights to nail down (and I received a Distinction, which I am immensely proud of). Here is a tip for aspiring video-makers: take lots of different shots and angles, short ones too – it saves time on the end product.

From my studies to the people I am mixing with, life out here is different. I miss home, my family, and all the friends I left behind. But this is a part of

my journey. There is something to be learnt with every step we take, even if they come in the form of mistakes made.

That is my story after SPM. I never thought I would be where I am today, much less known I would go through what I have. In the end, our stories can only tell you so much. What is important is that we all create that special little chapter in each phase of our lives. Know your limits, but always push yourself. May your chapter be greater than you could possibly dream – just do not be afraid to dream it.

Know your limits, but always push yourself. May your chapter be greater than you could possibly dream – just do not be afraid to dream it.



Wordsworth's Voize

Rachel Chan Suet Kay, 25, has not accomplished much in life. Still, how has a writer/assistant editor for indie music and lifestyle webzine Voize.my managed to get free Apples at launches and attend parties with celebrities for free?

In my Form Five yearbook, it was written that I 'would be the next William Wordsworth'. That, in my humble opinion, was the most inaccurate thing ever said about me. I considered suing for libel; friends tired of my constant bickering with teachers over English test scores often persuaded me to become a lawyer.

It never happened. Instead, I became a sort of celebrity-hunter and occasional movie-reviewer. I have to thank my editor Siva Chandran for initiating me into this select circle of musicians and public relations people who can get you some spectacular invites. To date, I have covered the 2008 MTV Asia Awards, been part of the first ever Asian Independent Music Award, videographed a rare Sphinx cat, befriended a Cosplay group, met local artists such as Yusof Ghani, Ahmad Zakii Anwar, and art connoisseur/film director U-Wei Haji Saari, watched and reviewed countless movies, and interviewed the Director of External Study of the London School of Economics.

Ah yes, that last part brings me to my studies. Fear not; this pop culture enthusiast has certainly been to school. In fact, this school is none other than the University of London External System, which offers the London School of

Economics degrees in the following specialisations: Economics, Management, Finance, and the Social Sciences. In 2003, I registered with HELP University College which offered the External System, and began my Diploma in Economics.

Back in secondary school, I was a member of the Science Stream, but decided to take on an extra subject called *Ekonomi Asas* (Basics of Economics) in SPM. This effectively made my hair fall out at a higher rate with ten subjects to handle. Then again, this was before scoring 17 or 18 A's in SPM became the 'in' thing.

Ekonomi Asas focused a lot more on human behaviour from the theoretical point of view, so it was quite a shock when I discovered that the Diploma in Economics was so mathematical. However, I did retain an interest for human behaviour in the theoretical sense. In the Diploma in Economics, there were four units – Mathematics 1 and 2, Statistics 1 and 2, Introduction to Economics, and Introduction to Sociology. My best subject was the latter, hence my choice to major in Sociology.

Sociology was not a popular subject as the specialisation was not offered in local institutions of higher education. It meant I would have to literally 'self-study' in the original sense of 'distance learning' as proposed by the University of London External System in 1858. But I was a maverick sort, and so with the guidance of a very helpful mentor, I pursued this course of study, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Sociology from the LSE with a Second Class Honours Upper Division.

Why then did I join Malaysiakini as a lifestyle section writer? During my summer break in 2005, my Sociology lecturer assigned me an internship with an education magazine called Education Quarterly. Before this, a few college mates and I were also on the editorial team of *Ceteris Paribus*, the Department of Economics' newsletter at HELP, where we wrote discursive essays on political and cultural topics. With journalism being a strong presence in my university career, I made the decision to establish a writing career for myself.

There is no set way of breaking into the writing/editing/publishing field, as a lot relies on one's own tenacity in getting their work noticed. Of course,

there are the normal channels, such as contributing a solid piece of work to a magazine (if you are a freelancer) or applying for a job at a publisher with a portfolio of high quality writings. Interning with a media company would also provide an advantage.

To date, I have published a few short stories and articles in websites and books, such as the US-based Long Story Short, youth political and pop culture webzine the CICAk, All Women's Action Network's (AWAM) Young Women Speak Out, and the MPH-published anthology *Urban Odysseys: KL Stories*. These are complementary to my full-time job as Assistant Editor of Voize.my, which is now a part of Malaysiakini.

Fun fact: while an interesting aspect of my occupation may involve interviewing international performers such as Pixie Lott and Raygun, the greatest would be seeing the world through their perspectives. Not just through the eyes of a celebrity, but those of a stage manager, a surfer, a sneaker designer, and many other interesting people whom I would not have had the chance to meet otherwise.

So the same goes for my story – it is my earnest hope that readers will be able to catch a glimpse of the writing/publishing industry through my perspective, and dare to pursue their own dreams, even as they empower others to do the same.

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Reality Bites

Rashid Karim, 24, graduated from the London School of Economics in 2008. He is currently working far, far away from home, and is desperate to return to open a small restaurant in Penang, or something like that.

It has been almost six years since I sat for my last SPM paper, and it is depressing when I think about it. By this point in life, I was supposed to have two degrees, enough money to buy myself a *Datukship*, three kids and four wives. Alas, I do not have any of these.

After SPM, with acceptable results and an ability to form sentences in English, I received a scholarship to do Law in the UK; I spent two years doing my A-levels and was later shipped to the UK. I attended law school in the London School of Economics. At university, I learnt very little most of the year, and then a little too much the month before my exams. I would then return to Malaysia over the summer where I would meet up with family and friends and talk about my experiences overseas, about how I grew as an individual and a scholar, about meeting hundreds of brilliant people from around the world, and our intense discussions about philosophy and politics.

I would throw in stories about my voyages to beautiful ancient European cities where I learnt about art, architecture, music, and revolutions. I would lecture my willing listeners about the splendours of liberal western ideas, adding powerful quotes from Kant and Rousseau, criticising the state of ignorance we

were in, and trying desperately to make a difference.

The truth was that I had forgotten most of what I studied, although the two quotes I had memorised were extremely useful. The only people I hung out with were Malaysians, and our conversations were usually limited to food, gossip, and movies. I did travel a lot, though if an entrance fee was charged, I found it sufficient to take pictures from the outside as evidence that I was there. I spent practically all my money on food; to me, there was no other point to travelling.

Oh, the hypocrisy.

I do suppose that at the time, I did sincerely think that I had become a new person. I did think that I was enlightened to the truths of the world, and that I knew better than everyone else. I look back now and realise that I was the ignorant one, trying to make a difference with my empty ideas. But I suppose such is life. You are wiser than you were yesterday, and there is always a lot more to learn.

Law as a subject interested me, but not so much as a profession. I wanted business and some experience abroad, so I joined a large accountancy firm in London as an auditor, and remained there today. There is no greater shock than the transition from school to work, and nine months in, I have yet to recover from it. I was used to doing things my way (which normally meant not doing things at all), but now there is a need to conform to certain professional standards, to keep clients happy, to keep managers happy, to meet deadlines, to comb my hair, and wear ties. I never had to work for anyone before and now I seem to be working for everyone.

In a city where everyone else seems to be getting fired, I am grateful to have this job. I have been learning a lot about how large organisations function and how to work with people. But I feel that there is more I can do. Joining an accounting firm was the safe, rational thing to do, and perhaps I did it for precisely those reasons. As clichéd as it sounds, life is short. Seven years ago I was a small boy in uniform, and that was a very short seven years ago. I have been doing safe rational things my whole life, and it is about time for me to live (I am aware that this is also very clichéd). It is time to take risks and do what

satisfies me. Maybe open a small restaurant on an island somewhere, or be an environmental activist. My plan changes every day. My mother calls these plans 'escapism'. She says that I am unwilling to accept reality. Well, if reality means that I have to sacrifice my happiness, then yes, I would rather escape it. To me, not doing what I want is to accept failure, and that I will not do.

So there you go: my life after SPM. I am more lost than ever. I still do not know what I want to do. I still do not know what I want, but I do not think that is a problem. I am more driven than ever to find my calling, and to learn as much as I can on the way. I may not have achieved any of my plans after SPM, but I have new ones now, and different ones to look forward to.

*You are wiser than you were yesterday, and
there is always a lot more to learn.*



Never Say a Woman Can't

Rasmina Ibrahim, 20, hails from Kuching, Sarawak.

She studied Physical Science at Labuan Matriculation College, and is currently pursuing her degree in Mechanical Engineering at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia under the Shell scholarship. She welds and wires during weekdays and shops during the weekends.

I am from a premier girl's school in Kuching, a competitive world where every girl had to be confident that she is beautiful inside out and strive to be knowledgeable. Having been in a girls' school for 11 years, I contested the perception of women as supposedly weak creatures by the largely chauvinistic society we live in. I believed that nothing should prevent women from being mentally prepared for tough conditions. This was one of the major factors that contributed to my opting for Mechanical Engineering.

My SPM results were five A's for all non-science subjects. For the science subjects, I received B's for all except Biology, for which I had a C. It was not really expected from a girl who had been in the first class during her school days, and I became a typical student with average results, a fact that I could not accept at that time. I felt embarrassed because my classmates had done well, while I did not even get an offer from Unit Pusat Universiti (UPU). I became frustrated, especially when nearly half my class received scholarships from various organisations such as PSD, PETRONAS, MARA, and Taylor's to pursue their studies overseas and locally. Fortunately, I was offered a place

at Labuan Matriculation College (LMC).

It was at LMC that I went through a one-year programme known as the Matriculation Level, a pre-university course. There has been many cases where SPM high-achievers fared poorly and were not allowed to continue, so I wish to stress the importance of not losing focus despite one's previous successes. It was a new experience with new freedom, and the syllabus are nearly the same as SPM but with a deeper focus on each subject.

Personally, I really felt I had let my mother down with my SPM results, so I was determined to excel in my Matriculation course. I frequently met up with my lecturers and tried to do past year question papers; it was the first time I was truly focused on my studies. Maybe it was because I was beginning to look at the world from a different perspective; namely, that of a college student, and not of a high-school student. Luckily, I achieved grades that were good enough to submit a Shell scholarship application for my undergraduate studies.

The Shell scholarship was one of the scholarships that I had aimed for even before entering matriculation. I applied for both local and overseas scholarships, but only managed to receive the local ones. The process was fairly simple – I applied online with my résumé, and before I got my offer from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), I went through a phone interview that questioned my thinking strategies and how I voiced my opinions. The phone calls were not pre-arranged, so the interviews were always short. However, disadvantages include the limited courses available. My primary choice was Civil Engineering, but the Shell scholarship does not cover that course, so I chose Mechanical Engineering instead.

Mechanical Engineering is a challenging course and in my first year at UKM so far, my subjects mostly cover the basics of every aspect of engineering, such as electric, mechanics, thermodynamics, material science, calculus, design software like AutoCAD, and workshops. Since the majority of my course-mates are male, the new surrounding is fun and different. I have to blend in, think about manly views, and act tough. I had to leave my femininity at the door when entering workshops and get my hands dirty while handling the machines, welding, filling, and other so-called manly jobs. It is something you

have to get used to and I was really glad I chose to take up this course.

Some of my family members and relatives are also majoring in engineering, which greatly influenced my decision. However, I did receive some negative feedback from them for taking this course as I am a woman. But the more people objected, the more I wanted to try my hand at it. I am no tomboy, mind you – I consider myself a feminine sort of girl who still loves shopping and applying make-up. Thus, taking on this male-dominated course has not and probably will not change that part of me.

Studying away from home has really taught me to appreciate my family and friends more. On the bright side, it has also given me opportunities to travel around Malaysia, build friendships, and also network with people, which will come in handy in the future. Life after SPM has been a roller-coaster ride, but what a ride! Hopefully, the roller-coaster will not break down, though I guess I will get to put my skills to the test then!

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I Opened my Box of Chocolates

Raymond Woo Weng Pong, 27, is pursuing a Master of Public Administration as a Fulbright Fellow at Cornell University in the United States. He went to Japan under a Monbukagakusho scholarship and graduated with a Bachelor of Law from Osaka University in 2008. He is a believer in the wisdom and capabilities of the 'Malaysian rakyat', no matter what the detractors say.

Nobody could have predicted that I, a student with average SPM grades of four A's and unconventional interests, would later go on to win prestigious scholarships that would bring me first to a top Japanese university, and then to an Ivy League school in the US for further studies. I hated studying for Malaysian common examinations, and instead loved spending vast amount of time reading on varied subjects (by reading, I mean everything but school textbooks).

Since young, I dreamt of going overseas for my higher education, especially after seeing my seniors come back from foreign countries. I envied their wealth of experience and different perspectives. They were also among the reasons why I chose the field of International Relations and Law – it was so that I could base my entire career on studying international society. However, apart from my lousy grades, there was no way that my lower-middle class family could pay for any tertiary education, let alone one based overseas. Thus, I knew that I had to win a full scholarship. Despite the odds and taunts

from some of my peers and even family members when I told them of my dream, I was determined to achieve it by constantly looking for scholarship opportunities.

Such an opportunity came during Form Six when I heard of the Monbukagakusho Scholarship, a grant provided by the Government of Japan that covers full tuition and stipend for studies in that country. It suited me well, as SPM and STPM results were not the main criteria for selection. Instead, an examination and an interview in English organised by Japan were the chief considerations. Thus, I applied along with one-third of my Form Six schoolmates. Although the examination tested a wide spectrum of knowledge in History, English, and Mathematics, which you cannot mug for within a short period of time, I was among the top scorers due to my 'extra-curricular' readings, and I impressed the interviewers with my passion for international affairs. Thus, this average student became one of the three scholarship winners from more than 1,000 applicants that year.

However, there was a catch – nearly all undergraduate studies in Japanese universities are taught in the Japanese language, which I had never studied before. Fortunately, the scholarship covered one year of intensive Japanese language studies. Although this is not the usual road Malaysian students would take (most aim for popular English-speaking countries like the UK and Australia), I thought that being paid to study overseas was already a great bargain, so I became determined to master Japanese from scratch and learn the culture, apart from my own university studies.

I won admission to the School of Law at Osaka University within a year. Despite initially facing difficulty with the written Japanese language (which, in my opinion, is one of the toughest languages in the world) and emotional stress from living in a culturally alien country where few spoke English, I not only obtained excellent grades and won the best prize for my dissertation, but I also became active in co-curricular activities that required working together with the Japanese and other international students.

In my final year at college, after listening to advice given by my academic supervisors and friends, I decided to aim for the ultimate prize career researchers

could receive: a post-graduate degree from the US. I started to strategise for this new plan. I was determined to spread my wings and fly again – this time around, across the Pacific.

However, the Japan-US transition was not a smooth sailing one. At first, I received some offers from good schools, but I had to give up my enrolment, as they did not offer full funding. It only succeeded the second time around this year when I not only won the Fulbright, which is one of the most famous scholarships around, but also gained admission to even better schools, and with better funding. I doubt that I would have achieved any of them without my credentials, in addition to the focus and multilingualism that I gained in Japan.

Thus, last August, I moved on to Cornell University to pursue a Master of Public Administration. My journey to the US was made possible by fellowships from both Cornell and Fulbright, and also from the support of numerous friends I have made in almost a decade since my SPM results were released.

The maxim “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get” is true, but it can only be opened by never giving up your dreams and being courageous enough to achieve them. Have an open mind about what life itself has to offer and do not fret over bad SPM results. When you advance further in life, you will realise that they account for much less than your subsequent diligence and resourcefulness, so prepare for pleasant surprises once that box is opened!

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Diamonds are Forever

Rezal Khairi Ahmad is a PhD candidate in Diamond Electronics at the London Centre for Nanotechnology, specialising in biological/chemical sensing using diamond nanostructures.

He is also the 3rd year representative in the LCN Staff-Student Consultative Committee and currently holds the presidency of the Malaysian Post-Graduate Council.

Post-SPM, it was either Astrophysics or Electronic Engineering for me, with the former being a childhood dream and the latter, the more practical option. Taking into account the needs of our nation, I chose Electronic Engineering, and that decision led me to Peterborough, UK to pursue a national diploma programme lasting over 2 years. I also took an additional A-level subject, Pure and Applied Maths, for better mathematical credibility, which is an essential skill for a placement in prestigious engineering programs in the UK. Upon successful completion, I went on to pursue a Bachelor's Degree at the university of my choice, UCL, London.

The magic happened in the final year where students were required to undertake a major engineering or science design project. Without time to waste and in great haste, I independently formed a relatively original idea with an enthusiastic research supervisor: to explore the electronics properties of diamonds.

“Wait a sec, diamonds and electronics? As far as I know, diamonds are a

girl's 'best friend', and definitely not electrically conductive".

Right on both counts, but there is more to the sparkle than meets the eye. Structurally, diamonds have a plethora of outstanding properties which make them a researcher's dream come true: extreme mechanical hardness, highest known value of thermal conductivity at room temperature, chemical inertness, and biological compatibility, just to name a few. As a result, this has led to extensive exploration in the application of diamonds in the field of science.

My year-long assignment was to investigate the nature behind the phenomenon on polycrystalline diamond surface. To cut the long story short, many hours of dedication resulted in this undergraduate project shedding some light on the aforementioned phenomenon and culminating in the development of the Transfer Doping Theory, which elucidates the conduction mechanism. It was one small step for a budding researcher, but one giant leap for diamond research. Thus, it was duly rated as a first-class undergraduate project by the Electronic/Electrical Engineering Department of UCL. After such an achievement, I embraced the notion of "diamonds are forever", and knew deep down that it would have a solid place in applied science and practical technology. I made a silent vow; "I'll be back".

Graduation took place a few months later, and I heeded the call of national duty. Voluntarily, I opted for a teaching position in the then newly established Tenaga Nasional University where I honed my public speaking, mentoring, knowledge-imparting, and leadership skills. A few years down the road, fate called upon me in the form of the Yayasan Khazanah Global Scholarship. A case for diamond electronics PhD research was made, and consequently, I was back in UCL to embark upon my scientific journey once again.

Fast forward to the present day, and here I am standing on the back of a matured single crystal diamond growth technology. Since my foray into this field, I have developed a full diamond microstructure for biological and chemical sensing, which can be used to detect life threatening diseases such as cancer, genetic defects, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. More importantly, because living tissue and biological molecules are compatible with carbon, such electronic and mechanical systems made out of diamond may also be

implanted in humans for long-term medical or health monitoring diagnosis.

So the next time you see diamonds adorning women's fingers or glittering around their necks, bear in mind that there is more to them than merely being fashioned into pretty baubles. Diamonds can be lifesavers if used for medical applications, among other things. It was not long ago when an initially unassuming undergraduate project sparked my interest in the field of Diamond Electronics, yet here I am several years on, at the finishing line of my PhD adventure, looking forward to my next undertaking.

Now, I hope to share the knowledge and skills I have acquired for the betterment of my country, Malaysia. Who knows – maybe someday you too will want to work with diamonds, and in turn, make diamonds work for humanity.

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Nature-Loving

Ruth Yeoh is Director of Investments at YTL Corporation Berhad, a US\$9 billion corporation in the power, water, retail, hotel, resorts, construction, cement, and e-solutions sectors. She currently leads the environmental division, where she reports on her organisation's environmental activities through writing its award-winning Sustainability Reports, published yearly. Ruth also pioneered the highly successful "Climate Change Week," YTL's flagship educational campaign designed to raise awareness on the important issue of climate change in her nation of Malaysia and globally.

Being an active environmentalist and serving as a Board Member of several environmental organisations, I am blessed to travel to magical places, with my most recent conservation visit being to the region of South America in November 2008.

I started my journey in Peru, and stayed at a Wildlife Research Centre in the heart of the Amazon rainforest. The first thing one will notice is the ruggedness of the journey. Getting there is quite an experience in itself. Imagine a van crossing rickety bridges, dusty roads, and long boat rides (the wooden bench, motor-propelled kind) upstream. The place I stayed at amazed me – totally sustainable to the core, with recycling bin baskets and limited electricity usage. Imagine ambient candle-light dinners in the evenings – the staff will literally lower a candlelit chandelier which resembles antlers, light up

the candles, and haul them up again with a rope – and being serenaded by the sound of cicadas singing to the wind.

Wake-up calls were the sounds of howler monkeys howling hauntingly in the distance, with 5 a.m. visits to research sites, ‘clay licks’, and rain forest walks. Scarlet macaws share your lodgings and will playfully fly in to visit your open-air room, which also has cold showers to keep to the sustainability theme.

I could go on and on about how I truly enjoyed my visit and how I sighted my first Capabaras. But an important point I want to share with you is how deforestation and human activity is a harsh reality. I observed some fallen trees and boat-mining activities along the riverbanks, before reaching the Research Centre.

The rainforest needs our protection. This is already evident in my home country of Malaysia, where our native *orang utans* and tigers are under threat from logging of their habitats, plantations, hunting, and other related human activities. My organisation (YTL) and I have previously worked with WWF-Malaysia to implement a “Save Our Tigers! Save Our Water! Save Our Lungs!” programme trying to conserve the forest banks of our beautifully bio diverse Malaysia.

We also work with international organisations such as RARE Conservation and The Nature Conservancy (USA), and closer to home, we work with our local partners – Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Reef Check Malaysia and TrEES (Treat Every Environment Special) – to roll out grassroots programmes in conservation, recycling, and environmental protection. We also have an in-house carbon credit consultancy that helps other companies and organisations go clean and green.

I now skip to my seven-day cruise around the Galapagos Islands. It has always been a childhood dream of mine to visit South America and the Amazon – I always knew that deforestation took place and wanted to see its splendour before it disappears! Hopefully, this will not happen with conservation playing an important role. Besides the beauty of the Amazon, the Galapagos has its own stunning charm in terms of the biodiversity the islands and oceans contain. Birds will quite literally and innocently walk up to you – one blue-footed “Booby” chick, for example, was following my pair of blue sandals,

probably wondering why they resembled his blue webbed feet.

It felt surreal to swim with the sea lions, watch dolphins swimming below the hull of the ship, and observe whales in the distance. I also encountered the famous Galapagos Giant Tortoise, a fantastic creature and conservation story in itself. Once almost hunted to extinction to produce “tortoise oil” for fuel purposes, the tortoise population has since returned, thanks to conservationist projects and the Ecuadorian government. The Galapagos Tortoise and the wildlife of the Galapagos are now strictly protected. I also saw two of the oldest-surviving tortoises – “Lonesome George” (the only known living specimen of the Pinta Island Tortoise in the Galapagos after the uncontrolled slaying of tortoises took place in the 17th Century) and “Diego”, who were flown in from the San Diego Zoo to revive the tortoise population during the 1970s.

This success story brings me to my final point. We have all heard how important it is to be involved in conservation and protect the environment. But what else can we do? I have always believed that one should not underestimate the power of individual will, simply because our collective voice and conscience is a lot more powerful than we think. If we vote for war, governments will go to war. If we vote for sustainable development and policies, then our leaders will follow. It all starts with public will. If we demand for recycling facilities and services, clean air and water, and the choice of using renewable energies instead of fossil fuels, then our elected officials will respond accordingly.

I have made it my personal mission and choice to be involved in conservation, and I am still learning! Above all, I thank and praise God for this honour and purpose-driven mission to protect His creations the best way I can. The environmental business is an ongoing one, and I am blessed that God is continually guiding me on this journey.

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Take me to Tanzania

Sally Ong Shin Yee, 25, graduated from Duke University, USA in 2007. Her volunteer and research activities in Tanzania, China, and Ghana garnered her the Leonard Rieser Fellowship, the Freeman ASSIST Fellowship, and other awards. Sally is currently a first year medical student at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, Singapore.

I was 19 years old when I first travelled to Tanzania alone. I had just completed my freshman year at Duke University, having taken my finals three days before boarding a flight from New York City to Dar es Salaam. At the stopover in Dubai airport, I was greeted by the sound of azan, the Muslim morning call to prayer. It felt surreal, hearing the azan again. It reminded me of my home in Johor, where I would hear it every morning before going to school in my blue pinafore.

As the connecting flight took off from Dubai, I witnessed the massive orange sun rising against a backdrop of clear blue sky, a desert that stretched as far as the eye could see, and man-made islands that were sculpted to perfection. It was the most beautiful sunrise I had ever seen. With my mind swarming with youthful idealism, I thought about how I would make a difference in Tanzania. My “Genocide in 20th Century” class and the liberal feminist professor who taught it had inspired me to channel my anger against injustice towards productive work.

In the five weeks I spent in Dar es Salaam, I taught 300 secondary school

students about eye health, facilitated vision screenings and the provision of eyeglasses by a trained optometrist to hundreds of community members, and helped raise awareness on HIV/AIDS alongside my fellow volunteers – a mix of Tanzanian and Canadian students working for the US organisation Unite for Sight.

As a foreigner, my senses were on overdrive. The sight of a begging mother carrying her malnourished child, a defeated old man who walked the streets with the hollow look of a hard life, and a child who sold candy and ice cream next to traffic lights during school hours disturbed me. I was confronted with the gross inequalities of Tanzania when invited into its decadent and luxurious private mansions, enclosed behind high walls. The difference was truly jarring. One minute I would be enjoying freshly grilled salmon in chandelier-lit dining rooms, and the next I would be approached by sickly and dirt-covered children.

Tanzania was not all work and deep thinking about injustice though. I learnt enough Swahili to buy products at the local market. I got addicted to ugali, samosas, and chai, learnt how to dance with sticks at a Gujarati wedding, was charged at by an elephant, saw shooting stars and slept in a tent in Serengeti National Park, and lost my passport and wallet during a snorkelling trip in the emerald green waters of Zanzibar.

My summer in Tanzania made me think long and hard about what I wanted to do with my life. I thought about Law, but through an internship with Save the Children in Washington DC, I found policy making to be a long and arduous process. When I was in Tanzania, people kept asking if I could provide medical help, as it was the service they needed the most. It made me think about a career in healthcare. I began shadowing a doctor at the Duke Eye Centre and found his work fulfilling and impactful. Consequently, I soon began volunteering for Unite for Sight in several countries.

In China, I travelled with an Arab-Israeli optometrist, a German Fulbright scholar, a Chinese law student, and a Wellesley graduate to the rural villages of Henan, the province worst hit by the blood sale scandal that infected many villagers with HIV in the 1990s. I distinctly remember the day when a middle-aged lady followed us to lunch because she desperately wanted to be seen by

the optometrist. After conducting a vision screening for her, we provided her with a pair of reading glasses. She was so excited to be able to see again – she jumped up and down and would not stop thanking us!

My experiences helped me decide on a career in medicine. After graduating from Duke in 2007, I applied and was accepted to Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School in Singapore. I am currently a first year student and have continued being involved in community services here. In between studying for quizzes and exams, I lead health screenings and other service activities in the community.

Some people are surprised by my decision to only start medical school now, since most Malaysians enter immediately after high school. However, it is never too late to start medical school – one of my classmates was 32 years old when she enrolled, having earned a PhD in microbiology and worked as a post-doctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore before that. I may be taking a longer route towards my goal, but I certainly have no regrets and am glad to have found my true calling.

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Europa, Europa

Sara Ooi, 23, is currently studying Industrial and Labour Relations at Cornell University, one of the eight Ivy League universities in the US. Her experiences and adventures abroad helped her gain acceptance and admission into Cornell. When she is not studying, she finds joy in figure-skating, speaking French and Spanish with her friends, and salsa dancing as much as she can.

I had always wanted to participate in an intercultural exchange program like AFS, but the timing never worked out for me. Then one day after SPM, I thought, “If I don’t do it now, I might never get the chance to again”. So amidst my overachieving friends who had already started college applications, I did something spontaneous. Restless as I was, I decided to go to Spain for three months and work as an au pair for a family in Pontevedra, located northwest of Spain.

After my mother’s initial confusion at my sudden outburst of spontaneity, she finally wrapped her head around my crazy idea and helped me buy a ticket to Spain. Within two weeks, I had packed my suitcase and settled my legal documents, and I was getting butterflies at the thought of meeting the family whose children I was going to be taking care of for the next few months. They lived in a part of the country where people spoke only Spanish, a language I had taken up just several months before and could barely even converse in.

My adventure began with a luggage mix-up, a hardship that was frustrating

during that period of time (imagine having to buy four days worth of underwear with people you just met!), but my host family did all they could to make me as comfortable as possible despite the language barrier. On that note, we communicated mostly through hand gestures and by slowly enunciating individual words for the first three weeks. Conversation was slow at times, with miscommunications that were both hilarious and embarrassing.

Every morning, I woke up to the sound of Spanish television – which dubbed everything, even the Simpsons and the Fight Club, in Spanish – and the chatter of the family getting ready for school or work. It was a surreal experience, rather like stepping into an alternate universe. I loved it, then I hated it, then loved it again; ultimately, I managed to overcome the barrier and start conversing fluidly in Spanish with the family, and I learnt so much just by understanding the rhythm and structure of their language, their points of view, and the way they thought.

I also led a very independent lifestyle; my days consisted of driving the children, Juan and Carmen, to school every morning, going for Spanish classes till lunchtime before doing some shopping or people-observing at the *pueblos* (little cafés) across town. Then I would pick the children up again in the evening and help them with their homework until dinnertime at 10 p.m. which is phenomenally late for most Malaysians, but perfectly normal for the Spanish! After a month had passed, I began to feel comfortable with my new lifestyle, enjoyed my independence, and gradually got used to the Spanish and their crazy driving.

Then one day, as I was waiting for Carmen and Juan at their school, I met another *au pair*, Krista, from Canada. She had been in Pontevedra for almost a year now, and we became fast friends. I soon began to spend a lot of time with Krista and her Spanish friends; we travelled to nearby towns, explored the nightlife, and met more people. We even visited other parts of Europe together – Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France, and England, just to name a few.

It was exhilarating. After three months, my Spanish was almost on par with the native speakers, and I had assimilated into the family as well as their lifestyle. My host family was the best I could ever ask for, patiently

explaining things to me when I did not understand, taking me with them on family vacations, and teaching me about the Spanish culture. Most of all, I appreciated the connections I had made that summer.

I will never regret my taking five months after SPM to travel to Europe. Not only was it an enriching experience that gave me a global perspective, it also gave me an edge in my application to Cornell University, where I am currently a senior in the School of Industrial and Labour Relations. Next semester, I will be doing a credit Internship with the International Labour Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, focusing on the elimination of child labour in developing countries.

In a way, my journey to Europe turned out to be more meaningful than I ever imagined. It gave me a new direction and helped me decide on a future career that I would be passionate about. Above all else, it allowed me to build wonderful and lasting relationships with people that I would otherwise never have known, in *Europa, Europa*.

Above all else, it allowed me to build wonderful and lasting relationships with people that I would otherwise never have known, in Europa, Europa.



A Boy, the Fence, and His Dream

Seet Chean Wee, 28, is spending his post-SPM days immersed in the spirit, culture, and most importantly, cuisine of the west.

Five days a week, this self-proclaimed gastronome can be found around the Boeing Commercial Airplanes factory (which happens to be the largest building in the world by volume) just outside Seattle, Washington, where he hones his trade as a newly minted aerospace structural engineer.

Growing up in Subang Jaya in the cool 80's and roaring 90's, I was accustomed to jumbo jets screaming by over what appeared to be barely a few meters above our roof! On more than one occasion, Dad would park the car just outside the fence of the Subang airport as we watched 747s soar effortlessly into the evening skies. That, to me, was simply magical. Little did I know that it was then that I decided what I wanted to be after SPM: a pilot or an aerospace engineer.

With SPM behind me, it was time to take the next step towards my future career in aviation. Piloting school was tempting, but mum balked a little, considering the days a pilot spends away from home and the prospect of her son being constantly surrounded by gorgeous flight attendants! I then thought it would not be a bad idea to pursue an Aerospace Engineering degree and then apply for piloting school. That would surely only help my cause.

After exploring my options, I found that Aerospace Engineering degrees

from American and British universities were ideal. With cost being a huge factor, I leaned towards Britain, considering that it only took three years to complete a bachelors' degree (as compared to four in the US), which translated to significant financial savings. Similarities between Malaysia's education system and that of the UK were also a big plus. I also found that the University of Bath was consistently ranked among the top three institutions in the UK for aerospace engineering.

What really sweetened the deal, however, was not only could I pursue my A-levels locally, I could also complete the first year in the degree of my choice with the University of Bath through the University of Sheffield – Taylor's University School of Engineering Twinning Programme. This arrangement was a win-win situation. It was an opportunity to earn my bachelors' degree in Aerospace Engineering with a prestigious institution at an acceptable cost for my parents!

My time in A-levels, where I took Physics, Mathematics, Further Mathematics, and Chemistry, was intense. The transition to English as the medium of instruction was a bigger challenge than I had expected. The emphasis on independent learning was also more pronounced, and was merely a prelude of things to come. I sat for the examinations in June 2001 and obtained the results needed to start the first year of my engineering degree. Everything was going as planned – or so I thought.

Then came September 11, 2001, which forever transformed the aviation industry and the world we live in. The event coincided with the first week of my degree and immediately casted doubts on my plans. I chose to forge ahead, believing that the industry would eventually recover.

A year later, I found myself packing my bags for the UK, and to the University of Bath I went! The following years went by like a breeze. Immersed in subjects such as Aircraft Aerodynamics, Propulsion Systems, Performance and Aerospace Structures, I remember days and nights where I would be buried deep in my lecture notes while scrambling to prepare for the next lecture. It was a cycle that seemed to go on forever! It was the encouragement from family and lecturers that kept me from 'taking it easy', reminding me to always

look at the bigger picture.

Also, being away from home and my comfort zone, I was forced to constantly evaluate my surroundings and view things from a different perspective. I was able to focus on my goal to excel academically, remember how dear my family was to me, and realise that I was more Malaysian than I thought. These lessons learnt, in my opinion, were as important as the degree that I originally left home for.

In the summer of 2004, I was awarded a Bachelor's Degree in Aerospace Engineering. My parents were present to mark the occasion with me. Their foresight in planning ahead, the financial sacrifices and unwavering support were key factors that made a small part of my dream possible. The rest was, and is, up to me.

Later that summer, I snagged a position with The Boeing Company as an entry-level aerospace structural engineer with the Commercial Airplanes division. Today, I am contributing to the design of the 787 Dreamliner.

Someone once told me, "Aim for the moon; even if you miss, you will land among the stars". These words have definitely served me well, and I hope they will for you, too.

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Psyched about Psychology

Shanuja Chandran, 20, has chosen the social sciences after painfully learning that pure sciences were not her forte. Currently pursuing her Bachelor of Psychology in HELP University College, the avid reader of murder mysteries will always be a proud member of the Girl Scouts and BRATs. She believes that children are like white canvases waiting to be painted by their legal guardians.

Coming from a family of four, I can say that I have a really supportive family. Both my parents work with the government, and we make up the average nuclear family. I attended an all-girls national school throughout my primary and secondary education.

So what comes after SPM anyway? Seeing as to how I have just spent the past 11 years of my life studying, I felt that I needed a long break. My post-SPM holiday lasted only three weeks, much to my chagrin.

I was in the science stream during my upper secondary school years. Fortunately, those two years of studying chemistry and physics made me realise that I am not fond of the sciences. I knew then that I was more of a social sciences person. Deciding what to do after Form Five was an effortless task for me – I simply followed my sister's footsteps. I decided that I did not want to pursue pure sciences, be in a 100 per cent examination course, or do Form Six. Using my SPM forecast results, I enrolled in the South Australian

Matriculation (SAM) programme at INTI University College. The course comprises of 50 per cent coursework (assignments, tests and quizzes) and 50 per cent examination results. During that one year, I took five subjects – Mathematics, English, Psychology, Legal Studies, and Economics.

Initially, being in this programme was an academic culture shock to me because the assignments required a lot of online research and student-based surveys. Also, there were always tests or quizzes happening one after the other. I was always on my feet, constantly revising because I never knew when the lecturers would decide to throw a quiz my way. My lecturer once said that if you keep walking on a grassy lane, the lane would eventually turn into a walking path; that is pretty much the concept behind the SAM programme. Before I knew it, SAM was over and results were released.

Next in line was deciding on a bachelor's degree; this was a very crucial decision for me as I was about to dedicate the next three years of my life, and possibly more, to it. Taking into consideration my SAM results and the course I was keen on, I chose to take Psychology. Coming from a Ceylonese background, Psychology does not fall into the typical degree category, which comprises of Medicine, Law, and Engineering. People tend to have the idea that a Psychology graduate can only be a clinical psychologist. Truth is, we can do anything related to dealing with people, including public relations, human resource, and a whole host of other job prospects.

As for me, being a shrink is the last thing I have in mind because I have greater tolerance and compromise for children than I do with adults. I chose this particular programme because for some unknown reason, the human mind attracts me. I wanted to know how attitude influences behaviour and vice versa. You know how if you have a failed kidney or heart, you can always replace it? On the other hand, if you are brain-dead, you are practically dead. Why do they not have brain transplants? To me, your affect (the noun, not the verb), behaviour, and cognition derive from the mind, and these things make up your personality.

I eventually enrolled in HELP University College for the Bachelor of Psychology (Hons.) programme. With HELP's reputable faculty of behavioural

sciences, I have been exposed to a completely different world of academia. During one semester, I studied Anthropology as an elective, and that gruelling subject introduced me to various cultures and beliefs I never knew existed. HELP's psychology programme touches on every aspect of Psychology, from Social Psychology to Abnormal Psychology, and even Behavioural of Eating! The lecturers, mostly with doctorates in hand, redefined an educator's role in a good way. The programme is 50 per cent coursework-based and 50 per cent examination-based. As always, the coursework keeps your feet on the ground at all times. Having a passion for reading is also a necessity for Psychology students.

Two years down the road, I can honestly say that I do not regret choosing this path. Every time I read my textbook, it feels like I am reading about those around me and myself. Psychology is applicable to everyday life, and you become a more understanding individual because of it. My plan for the future is to get hands-on experience first. With a basic degree in Psychology, I can work or volunteer in orphanages or kindergartens. In order to have a steady job working with children, I need a Master's qualification in Child Psychology. But for now, I can genuinely say that I like what I do.

Psychology is applicable to everyday life, and you become a more understanding individual because of it.



The World is a Stage, and We are the Actors

Sharon Lam, 26, is a former graduate of Universiti Malaya in a non-performing arts related degree. Currently living her dream as an actor/performer, she is constantly looking for opportunities to perform to improve her performing skills.

When I was younger – long before I was named *Tokoh Pelajar* or pursued my degree in Media Studies and International Relations in Universiti Malaya – I dreamt of performing. After my graduation and short stints as a public relations consultant and a writer for a local magazine, I pursued my dream.

It did not start off easy; I saw an advertisement for a musical theatre audition and decided to go for it. I had never auditioned before, and was not only terrified, but also completely unprepared. I did not know where to stand, where to sit, or what to do with my hands. Thus, someone commented that I was someone ‘without a passion for acting’ before rejecting me during the audition. I was adamant to prove the person wrong.

After being rejected, I decided not to go for another audition unprepared. Thus, I enrolled myself in a beginner’s acting class offered by the KL Performing Arts Centre (KLPac). I learnt that life in the theatre may not be all glamour and glitz, but it certainly is a life of Technicolor TV – there are always new discoveries about us and of others that constantly

stimulate our creativity and intellect. We were told that there is only one other profession in the world that required the kind of discipline required by soldiers – acting. After all, success in the performing arts requires much focus and discipline.

After graduating from the beginner's class, I decided to audition for the inaugural Theatre for Young People (T4YP) programme in KLPac. Each of us had to perform two prepared monologues – one classical, one contemporary – and one song. We were also asked to spontaneously improvise a scene involving Cinderella, her stepmother, and her two stepsisters. The initial nervousness was quickly replaced with excitement and enjoyment for what we were all doing.

I received a call soon after informing me that I was part of the first ever T4YP ensemble. I was euphoric as I could finally call myself an actor. Our first performance was a piece called “Ten: Theatrical Lightning Strikes Human Relationships”, which consisted of ten short plays. I was cast as a psychologist, and all of us had great fun learning more about the craft of acting as well as about each other.

I also learnt that acting is certainly not the best paying job, but it is certainly one of the most rewarding. I faced many ups and downs in my acting career; some days I felt certain about myself, other days I faced uncertainties. When criticised, I learnt to improve myself, to take chances, and to literally act on my impulses instead of thinking it through. For someone who was used to constantly analysing everything, it was a huge step for me towards tapping into my spontaneous side. During the T4YP programme, we were also allowed to explore other avenues. I was involved in the Short+Sweet 2008 festival and surprised myself by obtaining the Runner up for Best Actress Award.

The T4YP programme became a platform for us young actors to discover whether we were interested in acting, find the sort of acting we were inclined towards, learn our strengths and weaknesses as actors, and gain theatre experience before deciding if careers as actors suited us. I enjoyed every single challenging rehearsal, and always looked forward to

the next. As we neared production, the number and duration of rehearsals increased. There was great bonding among the ensemble members, and we felt like a family by the end of the season. Each ensemble member had different quirks and personalities, but what brought us together was our passion for theatre. Some subsequently went on to pursue acting in films and musicals, some in voice-over stints, and others pursued directing as well as writing.

After the T4YP season ended, I was cast as Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet, in a play based on the original, called "The Secret Love Life of Ophelia". As this was no longer a T4YP performance, I had to be up to par to be regarded as an actor on my own merits. It was not an easy performance; I even landed myself in the hospital on the morning of the opening night! However, I pulled myself together and went ahead to perform for opening night and all the other shows. My passion for performing – the same passion someone once said I did not have – was all I needed. I received feedback, both good and bad, for my performance. I learnt from the bad ones, and moved forward with great support from my encouraging director.

I am not one to take criticism without judgment, and so I decided to continue improving myself. I enrolled in an intermediate acting class, and graduated from the programme as a (hopefully) better actor. After all, if you want something enough, your heart will show you the way. Sometimes we make mistakes in life, but we have to learn to let them go and move on. It is perfectly fine to live by your ideals – just be adaptable to change, and always abide by your principles.

*It is perfectly fine to live by your ideals
– just be adaptable to change,
and always abide by your principles.*



Giving to God

Sherman Kuek, 34, is a theological researcher, a conversationalist on theology, spirituality, and culture, a pilgrim seeking to inspire the world to live in the way of Christ, and a friend journeying towards relational, formative, missional, authentic, transformative, meaningful, kingdomic and communal faith in the redemptive Spirit of Christ.

Paths. These are directions we have to choose throughout our lives; directions that lead us to very different places from those of our acquaintances.

Let me begin with what might be unique about my present vocation.

I am a Christian theologian. At present, I hold a doctoral degree in Theology, and serve a bishop by providing oversight on his behalf to all the pastoral ministries of his diocese. I also serve as his resident researcher for issues pertinent to his church.

My work involves extensive travelling in Malaysia, and occasionally, overseas.^v There are times when I spend more than two weeks per month away from home. I travel around to oversee the works of the various pastoral ministries of the diocese, to give talks and lectures in academic and church settings, and to attend meetings.

Most of the friends I grew up with are now young professionals living yuppie lifestyles, earning exorbitant salary figures compared to my minimal allowance, living in reasonably large houses, and driving cars far more

ostentatious than mine. In terms of happiness, I would like to think we all enjoy an equal portion of our dues. We chose different paths in life; one not necessarily being better than the other, just different.

As a teenager, I had always been quite philosophical. My more hardworking friends would be deeply engaged in academic pursuits, while my less serious friends were busy socialising and partying. On the other hand, I was quite an acute introvert who did not find the school curriculum particularly stimulating. Pondering on issues of life (and at times, death) was my favourite hobby. I loved contemplating questions that had no definite answers. Mathematics and Science, even History, were not appetising for the kind of inquiry I found engaging.

After my SPM examinations, in which I scored quite satisfactorily, I was rather obstinate about not taking the path my father had set for me – Form Six. This vehemence stemmed from objections I had about doing another two years of studies in Bahasa Malaysia, continuous rote learning, schoolteachers who fell asleep in classes, and having to continue wearing school uniforms.

So with my father's consent, I pursued pre-university studies in a private college. After that, I decided to study for a degree in Management, but not because I had a special affinity for that career. Rather, I had to choose something that my parents found agreeable, as they were concerned for the future of their son who seemed to live in an alternate world of abstract thoughts. They wanted me to be grounded in reality and hoped that I would perhaps 'grow up' as I embarked on this course of study. I eventually went to England and returned with an honours degree in Management.

Immediately upon my return, I announced to my parents that I was going to work for a church in a town almost 300 kilometres away that would pay me a salary of RM750 a month. This salary would cover my house rental, transportation and food. My parents were bewildered. What can I say; I was young then.

After almost a full year of working in the church, I decided that it was time to return home. At the same time, I also received a scholarship to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at a seminary in Singapore, which took me three

years to complete.

But just as I was preparing to return to full-time work at the church, I was offered another scholarship in the same seminary to further advance my theological studies. I was given between three and six years to complete this course of study. In the midst of writing my doctoral dissertation, I also embarked on many other church-related efforts and work. It took me about five years to complete my dissertation, and I eventually passed and graduated.

So this is where my path has taken me. I serve the Church. I am not paid a salary; like priests (although I am not one) I am given a sufficient allowance for my sustenance. For some people, my path is perceived as unique and inspiring; for others, foolish and impractical. I live a somewhat simple life, but I am a happy man.

I now do more than merely think about life; I also share my thoughts about life with others through speech and writing. Ironically, one of the things I have to do in the course of my work is managing! Thus, the degree in Management did come in useful after all.

People often ask me what I do, and I say, "I am a theologian", to which they reply, "What's that?"

*For some people, my path is perceived as unique
and inspiring; for others, foolish and impractical.
I live a somewhat simple life, but I am a happy man.*



Fear Not, Fail Not

Sylvia Tan Moh Sze, 20, is currently pursuing her undergraduate degree in Actuarial Mathematics at the University of Michigan, US, under the PSD scholarship. She enjoys reading, writing, and travelling whenever possible. Her current favorite Ben n Jerry's ice cream flavour is Phish Food.

“Study hard, do your homework, get good grades, and only then can you get into a good university and get a good job” – this was the message ingrained in me by my parents ever since I learnt how to read. I was also told that hard work and determination would get me to the heights of success. I would not wholly deny its truth, but in order to achieve one’s dreams, I believe that luck and the flexibility to adapt to the most feasible route play important roles as well.

In the first few months after SPM, I was confused. Opened up to a surfeit of tertiary education options but limited financial capability, I was partially torn between studying somewhere inexpensive and studying where my friends were. Taking all of those factors into account, I applied for a plethora of scholarships. Initially, I did not get any of the scholarships that I applied for, and since Form Six was not an option I wanted to explore, I enrolled into Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman under its Diploma in Accounting programme, which offered me a tuition fee waiver with my SPM results. I decided I would then continue with an Advanced Diploma in Commerce (Management Accounting-cum-CIMA).

Roughly one month into KTAR, I was informed that my appeal for the

Public Service Department scholarship was a success. For the PSD application, I decided on Actuarial Mathematics because I had taken enough Science classes in high school to last me a lifetime. I was never good at Physics, so I opted out of Engineering. I also have no affinity with Arts, which left me with Business or Mathematics. I could not apply to study Business because during that year, Commerce or Economics in SPM was a requirement, both of which I did not take. I am not excellent in Math, but I managed to get by.

I was selected to complete the American Credit Transfer Programme at the International Education Center (INTEC) at Shah Alam, Selangor. For the one and a half years that I was there, I took several introductory classes in addition to the necessary US college admissions examinations like SAT and TOEFL. Somewhere in September 2007, I applied and was accepted for the Winter 2008 (January) intake at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Three full semesters have passed since I arrived here at this campus town to continue my tertiary education. I am grateful to be given the chance to experience the differences between our British-based education system and the American equivalent. Here, we have the flexibility to pick our classes and arrange our own schedule. It can be liberating yet at the same time confusing. For example, I take core classes like Financial Mathematics and Life Contingencies for my major, alongside my distribution requirements like Humanities and Natural Sciences.

Since the university has a large number of international students, I do not really feel like an outsider. It is also easy to get involved with campus activities as there are about a thousand student organisations under the university to choose from. I am particularly involved in volunteering activities like the Detroit Partnership Day and the Alternative Spring Break Programme come next Fall.

On the other side of the spectrum, homesickness tops the list of the cons. This comes from being an ocean apart from loved ones and the lack of authentic Asian food around. The weather can also get really cold, sometimes to as low as -15 degree Celsius in the winter. Grading for the exams here are

also cumulative, so your performance during midterms will affect your overall grade for that subject. If you were to do badly in your first midterm, you will have to work a lot more for your second midterm and finals in order to bring your grades up again.

Studying overseas has taught me a lot of things and changed me in many ways. It made me realise how important it is to have my family and friends' support because without them, I would not have survived the first month here. It is also important to be able to stand up again no matter how many times you fall. Academic competitions are challenging; you need to be able to hold onto your goals and not get affected by how well others are doing in comparison. I believe this applies to you wherever you are studying, locally or overseas. As Zig Ziglar puts it, "It is your attitude, not your aptitude that determines your altitude".

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not your aptitude that determines your altitude".*



IB: The Infinitely Busy / Incredibly Brilliant Programme

Tam Jee Ian, 21, is currently finishing his International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma as a scholar at the International School of Kuala Lumpur (ISKL). During his free time, he likes to visualise mathematical models of human behaviour, listen to electronica, explore the vestiges of the internet, and daydream.

At a time when I was unsure of my destination for pre-university studies, my mother introduced me to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme.

The programme naturally piqued my interest. I did some research and found it to my liking. I also discovered that it was available at the International School of Kuala Lumpur (ISKL), which had been running the programme for over 15 years. The main attraction was their two scholarships available for Malaysians to pursue the programme each year. To cut the long story short, I applied for and successfully obtained the said scholarship. Therefore, I now write this essay with the purpose of conveying useful information about the IB programme. Hopefully, it will provide prospective students with a much needed first person point of view.

To me, the fundamental rule for thriving under the rigours of the IB

programme can be summarised into three words: do not procrastinate. Admittedly, this is much easier said than done. To do well in the IB programme, it is imperative for you to be responsible and have a good work ethic. The main reason for this is the nature of the work you have to complete.

First, there is the short-term homework. Much like the homework given to us in secondary school – only harder – these are the exercises, readings, and the daily workload, which usually have to be done within two days.

However, homework in the IB (and other pre-university courses) involves more than just short-term homework. There is the medium-term homework, comprising of projects, laboratory reports, quizzes, tests, oral presentations, and portfolios. You are given between four to ten days to prepare for or to complete them, depending on the nature of the assignment. These are given out by teachers once a week or once every fortnight, and they count towards a significant portion of your ISKL grade point average (GPA), and a medium-sized portion of your IB grade.

Lastly, there is the long-term homework, which is what distinguishes the IB from other pre-university programmes. This consists of major essays such as the 4000-word Extended Essay, the Theory of Knowledge essay, and the English World Literature essays. These essays are to be written just once, but involve weeks or months of intermittent research and as such, count towards a large portion of your IB grade.

Hence, I hope it is obvious why those who procrastinate could be overwhelmed by the demands of the IB programme. Without proper discipline and time management, juggling the short-term, medium-term, and long-term homework can be challenging.

Nevertheless, fear not. One of the main reasons I would advocate the IB programme is simply because there is a broad range of knowledge that one has the opportunity to explore. A fine example would be the subjects that I am currently studying: there is the standard science fare of Chemistry, Physics and Math at higher level, but they are combined with a mix of English at higher level, Economics at standard level, Theory of Knowledge and Spanish as a new language! Which other pre-university programme offers opportunities for

such in-depth study in sciences, humanities, and languages?

Furthermore, I think that the IB is one of the best, if not the best, pre-university courses to prepare oneself for university life. I was unsure of this prior to my IB studies, but having undergone and gotten used to the demands of the programme, I cannot help but concur. You see, I enrolled in an A-levels programme for about six months prior to my IB studies, and I can assure you that the IB programme has prepared me for university life much better than the A-levels would have, in terms of time management and working under pressure. Remember the short-term, medium-term, and long-term homework that I just described to you? That is precisely the type of work you can look forward to in university.

If you primarily view a pre-university course as a trivial necessity, I would advise you to not consider the IB programme as it spans two years. However, if you are willing to work hard and make sacrifices to obtain a pre-university qualification that is recognized by universities in Australia, America, and Europe, I wholeheartedly urge you to not only enrol in the IB programme, but to also try your luck at securing a full IB scholarship worth RM100, 000 from ISKL.

After all, our ability to navigate life's turning points depends less on our skill at turning corners; rather, it relies more on whether we outfitted proper brakes and tyres in the first place.

After all, our ability to navigate life's turning points depends less on our skill at turning corners; rather, it relies more on whether we outfitted proper brakes and tires in the first place.



Bouncing Back

Tan Yew Chern, 21, is an English Language & Literature major in Tzu Chi University of Hualien County, Taiwan who dreams of becoming a professor of Western Literature.

He considers himself a high school reject but is now happy pursuing his interest in Literature.

Applying to Tzu Chi turned out to be the best decision I made in my life.

People were baffled at my decision to pursue an English-related degree in a country that has a relatively poor command of the English language. However, for once in my life, I resolved to see something through from the beginning to the end. Besides, the lecturers in Tzu Chi are mostly from the UK or the US, hailing from prestigious universities such as Harvard and Lancaster, so I was confident I had made the right decision.

While most English departments in Taiwanese universities focus more on teaching English as a second language (TESOL), our department follows a different route; emphasis is not only placed on applied English, but on literature as well, with a ratio of 40:60. Apart from the subjects laid out by the department, students are required to fulfill 16 credits worth of general courses from 5 different categories: humanities, social, science, arts, and language. This way, students have the opportunity to study subjects not available to their own respective majors. I myself have taken up medical/nutrition related classes, as well as a flower arrangement and movie critique class, to name a few.

I am currently halfway into my sophomore year, and I have achieved much beyond my wildest dreams. I have been a recipient of the International Student Scholarship for two years in a row, and I have received the Dean's Prize for outstanding academic performance for three consecutive semesters. Besides that, I am the Vice President of Tzu Chi University's International Student Club and the President of the student committee in my department. I have also organised various projects such as drama performances, and am setting up the first ever LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) Student Support Group in eastern Taiwan. I was even one of four students selected to represent Taiwan in the Xiamen-Taiwan Interpretation Competition, but I eventually dropped out due to scheduling conflicts.

What I am trying to share here is that you should expand your horizons and think outside the box. Sometimes, chasing something blindly will only cost you all the precious time you could have used to pursue your real path. I was willing to do something different, and I discovered that Literature is something that I am comfortable with. My scholarship enables me to study here, literally for free, with my own allowances and the freedom to actively participate in a lot of voluntary social work.

Since Tzu Chi Organisation is one of the largest International Relief Organisation in the world, it is no surprise that we students are required to complete at least 6 hours worth of voluntary work. Personally, I find doing charity and volunteering more fun and meaningful than participating in clubs and societies. For the past two years, I have taken part in charity sales, asked for donation in the streets of Hualien to raise relief funds for the May 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, volunteered in Tzu Chi Hospital, and assisted on a weekly programme in guiding aboriginal children. Those, along with monthly visits to the recycling centre to help sort out recyclable rubbish and volunteering weekly in the Jing-Si Books & Café, took up most of my free time.

Pursuing an ELL degree has put me under constant scrutiny from, well, everyone! I have lost count of the many objections, and refuse to take heed anymore. With everyone else scurrying to pursue a medical degree or engineering degree, I chose Literature because it is my field of interest and I

saw the degree's potential. Of course, I will have to spend a few more years pursuing my master's degree and PhD, because I have always wanted to teach. In the land of language, there are many career paths to choose from. You could work in a publishing company, be a translator, an interpreter, a radio presenter or television anchor, or even a writer. As for me, I am content with my dream of becoming a professor of literature.

Everything is so different from when I was struggling during my SPM days. Quoting from an episode of the TV show *One Tree Hill*, "You can blame your circumstances of fate, bad luck, or bad choices, or you can fight back". Thus, I believe everyone can bounce back from misery and failure the way I did. Do some soul searching, recognise your strengths, and remember that faring poorly in high school does not mean you are not going to have a bright future; you just have yet to find your true calling.

*Do some soul searching, recognise your strengths,
and remember that faring poorly in high school does
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The Turning Point

Tang Khai Sheng, 22, finally realised his dream of studying abroad in 2008 when he participated in the Global Undergraduate Exchange Programme at the University of Mississippi, US sponsored by the US Department of State. He is also a Bank Negara Malaysia scholar pursuing Actuarial Science in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

I am writing this essay during my exchange programme at the University of Mississippi. With less than two weeks remaining, I am trying my best to experience and cherish every minute possible. It is also a good time for me to refresh the memories of my whole journey in the States. However, my train of thought wanders further back in time to the moment where I reached a turning point – the time after SPM.

It was the morning of March 8, 2005, when I went back to my alma mater – Jit Sin High School – to receive my SPM examination results. I was aiming for straight A1's as that might give me a glimmer of hope to obtain a PSD scholarship and further my studies abroad. As I did not have the funds to go overseas, getting the best grades to secure a scholarship was the only way I could realise this childhood dream of mine. When I glanced at the two A2's on my results slip, I saw my dream shatter into a million pieces.

Within the next two weeks, I applied for various scholarships like the

Petronas and Bank Negara Malaysia Scholarships, but to no avail. My only successful application was to the local Matriculation programme. I was in a deep dilemma, torn between the options of STPM or Matriculation. The former is said to be incredibly tough, with STPM graduates calling it a hellish experience. Going for the one-year Matriculation programme was always at the very bottom of my list as that would effectively kill off my dream to study abroad. I remember my parents saying, “Even if you graduate locally, you still have the chance to go overseas for your Masters or PhD.” After weighing my options over several sleepless nights, I finally reached a decision – Matriculation, here I come!

My days at Kedah Matriculation College flew by and those were some of the happiest times in my life. Living on my own for the first time, building new friendships, and experiencing campus life gave me enriching insights and prepared me for university. I would like to thank one of my teachers in Jit Sin, Mr. Tan Sui Eng, for encouraging me to apply for the matriculation programme. To me, achieving four-flat results seemed to be the golden ticket into my dream field at the university of my choice – Actuarial Science in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). However, I only managed to get my second choice, Statistics, and I was heartbroken.

Life went on, somehow. During my first week at college, I got to know other Actuarial Science freshmen. It affected me badly; I was so near, yet so far from my dream. I always hoped to switch my major, but my seniors said it was near impossible. I remembered breaking down in tears after being rejected following several appeals.

However, I then applied online for the Bank Negara Malaysia scholarship in KMK around March 2006. During the interview process, I wrote two essays – one in English and one in Bahasa Melayu – underwent one formal interview, carried out an individual presentation, and another group discussion/presentation, all in one day! My luck turned around, much like landing on Chance in Monopoly, when I received a scholarship acceptance letter from Bank Negara Malaysia into the Actuarial Science major. With that trump card in hand, I achieved the impossible.

After two years of studying Actuarial Science in UKM, I stumbled upon the rarest of opportunities – the Global Undergraduate Exchange Programme. I needed to fill up forms, obtain letters of recommendation from three teachers/professors, write a personal essay, and provide my TOEFL results. A brief telephone interview followed. My joy was indescribable when I was one of the seven Malaysians selected for the programme.

The past nine months have been full of wonderful experiences learning about the American culture and travelling to new places. It has also been a journey of self-discovery as I realised that I really love outdoor activities! One of the coolest things I have done was hand-gliding at a height of 2000 feet. Flying high in the sky overlooking seven different states in all directions was something incredible! Celebrating Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter gave me an extra taste of America. Dressing up as ‘*Kiong Xi*’ during Halloween was something new to the Americans; they could not help laughing when I told them that Chinese vampires actually hop.

My dream finally came true. Some people thought that I was on a lucky streak, some felt that these incidents were all coincidences, others felt that it was my destiny. I think that God has His way of making things happen and will provide us with the best in life. I, for one, am humbled by all the blessings I have received.

My friends, walk on with hope in your heart, keep your dreams alive, have faith, and you will surely succeed one day!

*With that trump card in hand,
I achieved the impossible.*



Beating the Bends

Tang Mei San, 20, is pursuing Medicine at Monash University Malaysia. When she gets tired of her medical books, she turns to her blog and babbles about everything from Malaysian politics to Hong Kong movies. She enjoys discourse, especially with people who do not agree with her.

When my application for the 2007 ASEAN Scholarship was rejected, the Singapore Ministry of Education offered me a Merit Award instead, which had two concessions: firstly, it would exempt its recipients from the Singapore Education Fund; secondly, payment of school fees would be based on local students' rate and this could give foreign students up to approximately 90 per cent reduction.

However, the Merit Award would not secure me a place in any of the Singapore Junior Colleges. In other words, I had to apply for a place in the Junior Colleges on my own.

The extremely competitive admission into the Singapore national education system meant that admission was difficult even for a Merit Award recipient. The junior colleges would not only have to admit their very own bright students, but also ASEAN scholars and returning Singaporeans.

Nevertheless, when Temasek Junior College called me in for a selection test, I went for it. Weeks later, I was told that my application had been rejected, but I did not attempt applying to another junior college. The Merit Award was

then left aside and the deadline passed.

Three weeks after SPM, I enrolled into Sunway University College for A-levels. I was perhaps the most reluctant student, probably because I refused to believe that I would end up in a 'popular' college just 20 minutes from home, rather than a 'stellar' college in a foreign land. However, the 18 months in Sunway College turned out to be fulfilling and meaningful.

I came to know Ms. Chong Soo Sin, my Biology lecturer and one of the persons whom I hold in highest regard. She is a petite lady with a fierce passion for Biology. She gave me the freedom to explore as much as I wanted, never hesitating to give her best answers to my endless questioning. She was always patiently waiting for me to finish up my work in the laboratories, even late into the evenings. Most importantly, she showed me that the journey in science is one of constant research and learning, and acknowledging this fact does require a great deal of humility, courage, and passion. It was also there that I met a group of friends, a diverse group in terms of personality, with whom I shared the most laughter and tears.

After that, I applied to read medicine at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) as I have always dreamt of doing my medical degree there. Two weeks later, I was notified for an interview scheduled on April 1, 2008.

With the mock final examinations just around the corner, I had to secure an air ticket to Hong Kong quickly. It was a period of intense pressure and uncertainty, brought on not only by the upcoming examinations, but also the fear of not being able to get to Hong Kong and the anxiety for the interview. You must also be wondering, was the whole journey worth it? Realistically, only one foreign student would be admitted into the medical faculty annually.

But I could not care less. HKU had been my dream university for years. At the very least, even if my chances were one in hundreds, I wanted an opportunity to make my best attempt. At least, despite the eventual rejection, I can now tell myself to move on without any regrets.

There is one main theme that I am trying to convey by sharing my story with you; life is a series of bends and you will never know what is around the corner. I once thought I would head to Singapore right after SPM, but I ended

up staying in Malaysia.

I was a reluctant student in Sunway College, but I completed 18 months of A-levels with a strongly reinforced passion for Biology and a network of wonderful friends. I dreamt of entering HKU even before I finished SPM, but I ended up in Monash, enjoying my daily learning as a medical student.

I do not want to see my failures as dead ends to my dreams. I want to see them as bends along my journey. Around the bends, I will be discovering whole new paths that will ultimately lead me to where I want to be.

I hope you will come to realise and appreciate this in the years to come. Keep your mind open, your heart focused, and you will achieve your dreams because opportunities abound, not only after SPM, but also throughout our lives. The miracle of achievement is not how you do it, but how much you enjoy doing it. Keep faith, never lose courage, and you will realise your dreams.

*The miracle of achievement is not how you do it,
but how much you enjoy doing it.*



Worth

Tara Thean Mei Feng, 20, is studying at Princeton University in New Jersey, USA. She enjoys ballet and holds an Associate Diploma in piano performance. Tara hopes to be a journalist or a lawyer, and thinks Rice Krispies Treats make the best snacks in the world.

I have always been thankful to be among the lucky few who can say, with absolute certainty, that they loved school.

My memories of high school form a blurry, happy kaleidoscope. I found my hands full of learning and discovery and exciting things to do. Having immersed myself in activities throughout, I expected to lead a similar lifestyle after high school, and to learn even more than I had before.

What I found instead surprised me; it was not events or activities that taught me the biggest lessons, but a particular undertaking of mine: applying to study in the United States.

Like many of my peers, I approached this process with apprehension. It is famously complicated, guaranteeing months of studying, essay-writing, and begging teachers for recommendations. But beneath the surface drudgery lies an immensely valuable opportunity for self-discovery and reflection, and I can testify to this now: beyond mastering obscure words for the SATs, I learnt lessons that I can truly call invaluable – both in the context of college applications and life in general.

The most important thing, I found, was taking ownership over my own choices. It was important to me not to let anybody second-guess my own feelings about what I wanted out of my education or life. The very act of applying to university meant assuming the mantle of adult responsibility for my own future, and from thereon I refused to allow anyone to think for me. I saw some very qualified friends falter because they were drowned in the deluge of well-meaning parties trying to steer their lives as they saw fit. The trick here lies in knowing what to listen to, and what to ignore.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to ignore criticism, and here lies another demon: the tendency to tether your sense of self to your accomplishments. I know what that is like. I know all about that ugly cutthroat frenzy accompanying the university application process. Competition, and certainly the type involved in this process, emphasises evaluations, which almost always cause anxiety and battered self-esteem. Perspective is key – it is you that makes you, not your university or your qualifications.

When I was accepted into my university, I was thrilled – but in the months afterward, it became obvious that I was still the same person underneath. I still liked dessert and Beethoven, and I was not inoculated against hardships or heartbreaks. University, however dressed up it may be, is simply a logical progression, and I cannot emphasise enough the importance of preventing it from defining your identity. Another's criteria for success need not be yours.

When my own university decisions arrived, I was thrilled to have been admitted to a number of wonderful universities, but this introduced its own quandary: choosing which to attend. With so many factors to consider – location, teaching style, and extracurricular offerings – I was wracked with indecision. But I had, very short-sightedly, left out a crucial factor in weighing my options: funding. Only one of my choices had offered me any form of financial aid. The others, my parents reminded me, would take too large a chunk of the family finances to be feasible. And so my decision was made by default – one I had never wanted to make based

on money.

To this day I still remember the garbled feeling in my gut as I pressed the “decline” button on my other choices. I was elated, yet hurt; thankful, yet wistful about what might have been. It may sound silly now, but there was a huge feeling of loss and regret. That day I learnt the lesson I now hold closest to my heart: not to take anything for granted. I finally saw the grim reality of the financial burden that university was heaping on my family, and I felt indescribably grateful for the easy life I had. Now I find myself far more conscious not only of the reality of money, but of many other kinds of realities. Nothing is inexhaustible.

I always find it difficult to answer questions about the “secret” or “shortcut” to getting into a good university in the United States. The process is not formulaic, and there is no shortcut – it is complex and time-consuming in any situation. And when I consider the sleepless nights, the hours I sat until my butt was sore, the endless agonising and soul-searching, I sometimes wonder: why did I do it? But I found my answer long ago, standing outside Firestone Library one cold night and staring up at the black sky with its spattering of stars, life and stress and beauty bursting from every crack and crevice. It is because nothing compares to this. And one day, after these four years have gone by, I know I will once again be grateful for the ability to say truthfully that I absolutely, unabashedly, and completely loved school.

Another's criteria for success need not be yours.



Dreams are my Reality

Teng Hui Li, 20, received her secondary school education at St. David's High School, Malacca and pursued A-levels at Taylor's University, Subang Jaya. She is currently reading Economics at Harvard University.

The lights were dimmed. Glorious orchestral music reverberated through the grand Concert Hall, breaking the silence that had dawned upon the awestruck crowd. With the ruffling of gowns and the mesmerising sparkle of jewels, the Swedish royal family entered with sublime majesty. All eyes were focused on the seven gentlemen who entered next, the Nobel Laureates of 2006. Thunderous applause and a standing ovation greeted them as they stood on stage, savouring the honour to be bestowed upon them.

Winning the grand prize in the National Science Challenge in 2006 saw my teammates and I boarding a flight to Sweden to witness the Nobel Prize Ceremony. More significantly, and to my great joy, I had the opportunity to speak to the Nobel Laureates during the Nobel Prize Reception. It was quite intimidating at first as we were merely a trio of high school students amongst a sea of distinguished guests. However, it turned out to be the most rewarding experience as the warmth and friendliness of the Nobel Laureates quickly put us at ease. I also learnt that the most important tool in the pursuit of knowledge is curiosity. It fascinates, excites, and propels us to question the norms and challenge conventions. I realised that, like us, the Nobel Laureates

are ordinary people, but their achievements are extraordinary because of their passion to unlock the secrets of our enigmatic world.

Attending the Nobel lectures, I was fascinated to learn about the discoveries that would revolutionise our world. Sharing the Nobel Prize in Medicine, Professor Andrew Fire and Professor Craig Mello discovered that RNA interference is the fundamental mechanism for controlling the flow of genetic information in cells. Professor Roger Kornberg received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for successfully creating a molecular image of the entire transcription process.

Dr. John Mather and Professor George Smoot obtained a perfect blackbody spectrum with the COBE satellite, providing evidence to support the Big Bang Theory and cementing their places as laureates of the Nobel Prize in Physics. Professor Edmund Phelps was awarded the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel for demonstrating the need for national savings in the form of a mandatory pension system. National savings are needed to develop human capital for the benefit of all generations. His groundbreaking work challenged the dominant perception at the time and led to the formation of more effective economic policies.

How has this amazing encounter helped me in my journey after SPM? It made me realise that the common trait binding the Nobel Laureates together, despite their different fields of research, is passion. Passion is the love for what they are doing; the enthusiasm to pursue that interest beyond the boundaries of conventional knowledge, and the willingness to soldier on despite the many obstacles and difficulties that they may have encountered. It opened my eyes to the infinite possibilities of what we can achieve if we have the curiosity to unearth a problem and the creativity to provide a solution.

So how did a bunch of high school students get the amazing opportunity to attend the Nobel Prize ceremony? It all started with an invitation to participate in the National Science Challenge, a competition organised by the Academy of Sciences Malaysia for Form Five students throughout Malaysia. The preliminary round involved written and oral quizzes. After making it through to the national level competition, my team and I had to complete

a science project and present our results to a panel of judges. Based on the judges' decisions and the results of a written quiz, we faced off against another three teams in the finals, which was conducted like a television game show. We had strong opponents, and we faced neck-to-neck competition right up to the last question in which we were tied with another team.

Not daring to breathe, we answered the question and waited in agony for the final tally. The results were announced – we won! The sense of joy, excitement, and relief was overwhelming. But the journey was no mean feat; between studies, extra-curricular activities, exams, and preparing for the competition, we had to juggle our time wisely. All that effort and teamwork was well worth it, as the overall experience was more than we ever dreamt of.

Daring to dream is not just for scientists, Olympic medallists, or Academy award winners; it is also for that dreamy high school student who may just become the first Malaysian to win the Nobel Prize, the school runner who is sweating it out on the field, or the talented actor in the school drama team. In short, it is for anyone who is a little tenacious, a tad adventurous, and has a great zeal for life. So dare to dream and work towards your goal, because if Lady Luck is on your side, your wildest dreams might just come true.

It opened my eyes to the infinite possibilities of what we can achieve if we have the curiosity to unearth a problem and the creativity to provide a solution.



Thirst for Adventure

Tham Pei Ting, 24, wanted to be a doctor. She took a gap year before starting university, but ended up staying on at an outdoor adventure company and has since decided that a career in the outdoors is the way for her. She has also been selected for the Cert IV Internship Program for nine months in Outward Bound Australia.

As an adolescent, I attended a Chinese primary school. I was very active in co-curricular activities, especially in the Scouts, and scored 11A's and 1B in SPM.

I wanted to be a doctor. It felt natural to meet the expectations of my peers and teachers, and I had proven my academic capability to pursue it. After SPM, I secured a place at Raffles Junior College through an ASEAN scholarship.

A-levels in Singapore were tough and humbling. For the first time, there were many people better than me. I met so many who aspired to be doctors, and sometimes, for the wrong reasons. I was disillusioned by the competition because I felt that a medical vocation was not a bandwagon for just anyone to jump onto.

At Raffles, I learnt rock climbing, kayaking, and went on expeditions such as a trekking trip to the Himalayan region of Sikkim. There, we did a community service stint for two weeks in Kolkata, built a clinic in a rural village, and met many locals who seemed upbeat despite their poverty. The experience touched

my heart and strengthened my conviction to become a doctor so that I could help the needy.

After A-levels, I did not return to Singapore. A Singaporean education may be perceived as a guarantee of a good future, but this future does not suit everyone. Nevertheless, although I did not enjoy living in Singapore, I enjoyed the academic curriculum and am very grateful for the exposure.

Later on, I took a gap year and embarked on a three-month Raleigh expedition in Sabah, which tested my tenacity and ability to work in a challenging environment. I lived in villages and jungles and survived in spartan conditions. I particularly enjoyed building a village kindergarten.

Next, I took up various work stints in a corporate company, an Italian restaurant, and a Malaysian outdoor adventure company – Nomad Adventure. I also applied for a scholarship to study Medicine but did not get it, leaving me in a dilemma because it would be a great financial burden on my family if I pushed on with my dreams. I finally gave up my ambition of becoming a doctor and felt very lost.

By then, I had saved enough for a one-month solo backpacking trip to Nepal. I trekked for two weeks to reach the Everest Base Camp, did white-water rafting, kayaking, and paragliding. I met wonderful locals, went on 12-hour bus rides with a live chicken under my seat and furniture on the bus roof, and watched the sunrise behind Mount Everest. I took tremendous pride in achieving all these feats before I turned 21.

I was then accepted into a local private Pharmacy degree course, though my heart was not in it. At this time, my boss invited me to stay on in Nomad. Enticed, I accepted the offer, but little did I expect for things to change completely.

At Nomad, I dabbled in every aspect of business, from handling sales and marketing, outdoor operations, to managing the outdoor equipment shop. I had the opportunity of designing my own urban race in Malacca and KL, and played an important role in one of the biggest adventure races the company ever organised. That was when I discovered my flair for event management. Above all, I enjoyed working with outdoor enthusiasts and providing exceptional

outdoor experiences to the public.

I enjoyed myself tremendously in those two and a half years. Unsurprisingly, the idea of ditching university and working in a relatively unconventional industry was not well received by many around me. Still, I stayed on.

During my stint, I worked with foreign professionals as well as locals from the outdoor education industry. I learnt that opportunities abound overseas, especially in countries where outdoor recreation and education is well recognised. The many aspects to outdoor recreation can be as simple as teaching someone the 'flying fox' or even creating a learning opportunity where a person afraid of heights overcomes his fears in a supportive environment.

Experiential education cuts across age, gender, physical ability, and language boundaries, because each person's experience is unique. Many areas of outdoor recreation are also relatively unknown in Malaysia, such as wilderness first aid and rescue, outdoor gear design and manufacturing, etc., not to mention the endless serene mountains, beautiful jungles, raging rivers, and breathtaking vistas around the world to work in.

My latest joy is being one of only two successful international applicants to be accepted into the nine-month Cert IV Internship Course in Outward Bound Australia, recognised worldwide as a certificate of competence for outdoor instructors.

At the end of the day, it is okay not to know what to do after SPM, because life changes at many different stages. With an extra thirst for adventure, you will be surprised at how much you can achieve.

With an extra thirst for adventure, you will be surprised at how much you can achieve.



Choosing Liberty

Tineswari Maruthamuthu, 27, is a studio manager and Mac designer at an advertising agency in Auckland, New Zealand. She completed a Computer Graphics and Design degree in 2005. She is also an artist, a face painter, a salsa dancer and an avid fan of rock music, vintage clothing, and art galleries.

I am a half-Chinese, half-Indian Malaysian, born and bred in Seremban. Having lived and worked in New Zealand for five years now, explaining my racial heritage is still amusing, although I have been doing it most of my life. I attended an all-girls primary and secondary school, majoring in science. However, I pursued an art-based tertiary education after losing interest in the science field.

Unfortunately, there is a social stigma against 'smart' kids who do not pursue scientific professions. Thankfully, I dismissed its ludicrousness upon realising that I could not suppress the need to create through art, writing, and poetry, which was as natural as breathing for me. Graphic design was a logical solution because I could enhance my natural abilities and have a fair chance of obtaining a job.

The biggest obstacle I faced while pursuing my three-year graphic design diploma from PJ College of Art & Design was the four-hour daily commute between Seremban and Petaling Jaya. I left my home at dawn, returned at night, rushed through my dinner, and completed assignments before falling

asleep in exhaustion. My social life was non-existent, and the stress of dealing with the Malaysian public transport system everyday left me frazzled. However, it was a necessary evil I had to endure, since living in PJ was not an option at the time.

Upon graduating with my diploma, I was given a life-changing opportunity to complete the final year of my design degree in New Zealand. Coming from a middle-class family, I did not even think it was an option, but my parents were very supportive. After three months of frantically organising transcripts, visas, and flights, I was on my way to another country, flying on a plane for the first time, and giddy with excitement. From July 3, 2004 – the day I arrived in Wanganui, New Zealand – I fell in love with the country that I now call my second home.

Being left to fend for myself in a foreign land at 21 was both exhilarating and a little scary. I cherished the change, but took a while to adjust to the cold climate. I was fortunate to live with a wonderful Maori couple throughout my year of study. I became a part of their whānau (family) and learnt a lot about the fascinating local culture. Of course, it was not all a bed of roses. Most times I was lonely and usually broke because I would use all my pocket money for assignment materials. However, I remained positive and poured my energy into my studies, knowing my parents had sacrificed so much to get me here. My proudest moment to this day is having them attend my graduation a year later, where I picked up the Best International Student award. Life in Wanganui forced me to grow up a lot quicker, and it has made me a far better person today.

After graduating and finding employment as a graphic designer in Auckland, I began painting at night while holding down a full-time job, determined to achieve a dream I have had since I was six. As a child, I was fascinated by the paintings in my father's Britannica encyclopaedias, and dreamt about being an artist one day. It was a rather romantic notion, so I kept my aspirations hidden, for I was afraid of being laughed at. But with age came maturity and understanding, and I soon realised that the term 'starving artist' is misleading, for we are the pilots of our own destinies. Determined to make this long-

suppressed dream come true, I joined the New Zealand Art Guild in 2006 and have since taken part in 17 national art exhibitions.

I picked up Cuban salsa the same year, and after six months of vigorous training I became a part-time dance teacher. I am also a self-taught face painter, setting up my company 'Colour Kingdom' in January 2009 with my partner who does balloon sculptures. We cater our services Auckland-wide and have heaps of fun while getting paid for it! I plan to pursue a Masters in Art Therapy in 2010 after discovering the subject during my degree, and I am thrilled to finally find my calling.

Creativity is something to be proud of and is fast becoming one of the most sought-after commodities in the world. There are critics who will indignantly tell you to get a 'real job', but there is little use in convincing them that a creative profession is as valid as any other white-collared job. No matter what path you choose to pursue, remember your deepest passions and find something that ticks all of your boxes, and not what everyone else expects of you. Even if it is not the norm, stay true to your own highest convictions, and you will not go wrong. Time does not wait for anyone, so grab the reins, hold on tight, and enjoy the ride.

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and I soon realised that the term 'starving artist' is
misleading, for we are the pilots of our own destinies.*



Life's a Beach

Wan Ahmad Azimi bin Wan Azmin, 27, was brought up in the Philippines and Pakistan, and has never sat for any examinations in Malaysia. Upon completing his undergraduate studies at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, he began his career in marine biology, which feeds his passion for the conservation of marine ecosystems till this day.

If you saw me on the streets, you would deem me an average Malay among the millions of Malaysians. What you would not notice is that unlike many Malays, I have difficulties communicating in our mother tongue. That is right, a Malay who can barely speak Bahasa Malaysia. How exactly I became a novelty in my own country was due to my upbringing. In the past 26 years of my life, 15 were spent outside of Malaysia.

It all started in 1990 when my father took up a job in the Philippines to work with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), a multilateral aid organisation. In such a way, my family and I were whisked off into our new lives in a foreign country. Years passed, and when I graduated from high school, I distinctly remember how proud I felt to be among the 70 graduating students of the International School of Manila, ready to head into the next chapter of our lives.

But while my classmates spoke excitedly about education options in the US or Europe, I simply listened quietly as I knew my path had already been laid out for me. I was to study medicine in Pakistan. Admittedly, I never really questioned this. Being the filial son, I followed my father's wishes for me to be

the doctor of the family.

So, wide-eyed and fresh-faced, I moved to Pakistan to start my medical studies without anticipating the challenges that would await me. As it turned out, my lecturers were corrupt and regularly asked for bribes in return for better grades. Raised in a household where I was taught to do the right thing and stick to my principles, I made the decision to leave Pakistan. I felt the time had finally come for me to head back to where my heart was – Malaysia.

Back in Kuala Lumpur, I sought other medical institutions to attend. But after weeks of trying and countless applications, I was rejected. My parents were devastated, and heartache and arguments soon ensued. Finally, when I sat down with them one dinner, they told me not be discouraged and to pursue what I was really passionate about. Only then did I let my true self speak; I wanted to become a marine biologist.

Consequently, I enrolled at Kolej Universiti Sains dan Teknologi Malaysia, KUSTEM (later upgraded to Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, UMT), to study marine biology in 2005. Despite the language barrier that I had to overcome, my interest in conservation grew stronger. I slowly began to see my role as a guardian of our marine environment after reading, researching, and discussing issues relating to the ecosystem with lecturers. Fortunately, I also had many other opportunities to explore this newfound calling. Apart from doing a dissertation on sea turtle hatchery management, I even interned with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) on conservation projects for the hawksbill turtle and painted terrapins.

Some of my classmates in UMT had doubts about my success in the conservation field. However, I proved them wrong, especially when I told them that I had already been offered a job to work on coral reef and sea turtle conservation in Pulau Tioman. When I started working, just being part of the movement that cared for and preserved the marine environment made everyday a blessing. From diving underwater and conducting Reef Check surveys to teaching primary school students about marine issues, the field of marine conservation biology has been a truly rewarding journey for me. Until today, the most memorable experience in my life has been witnessing a turtle nesting.

Besides this, there are many other subfields of marine biology that one can pursue. For example, I have friends who are involved in aquaculture companies that breed fish, while others are in oil and gas companies to monitor the environmental impact of their activities. Some are still involved in the tourism industry, especially as scuba diving instructors, while there are those who have dedicated their future to academic research.

After all that I have gone through, I can assure you that if you fail, there will always be other doors of opportunities waiting to be opened. If you know what you want for yourself, then let your true voice be heard. Follow your passion, so that you can enjoy what life really has to offer. Like I always say, "Life's a beach, deal with it."

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do the right thing and stick to my principles,
I made the decision to leave Pakistan.*



If you can Dream it, you can Do it!

William Chan Guang Yu, 22, is currently reading law at the University of Cambridge under a Cambridge Commonwealth Trust Award and a Trinity Overseas Scholarship. After completing SPM, he pursued A-levels under the School Achiever Scholarship Award. He deferred his entry and instead took a gap year to participate in a Raleigh International expedition.

“People like you do not get into Cambridge, and no, they do not offer any scholarships”, he said to me.

As it would turn out, he was wrong on both counts.

If there is one thing I hope to get across to you by the end of this story, it is this: never let anyone tell you that you are incapable of anything. Never let anyone tell you something is impossible. Whatever you dream of, you can achieve.

I smiled back, “Well, thank you for your time, Sir.”

I had gone to ask him what I could do to improve my prospects of getting into Cambridge and whether they offered any form of financial assistance. In life, I guess there will always be people telling you that you are not good enough, but at the end of the day, only you decide the validity of such a statement.

My story begins in high school. Like many others, I spent a lot of time worrying about what I would do after SPM. I admit that I had no clue as to

what my future held outside the school gates. Then, at the start of Form Four, my English teacher sent me to the annual Oxbridge essay writing competition. At the end of the competition (nope, I did not win), the people there showed us slides of Cambridge University and told us stories about their time spent there. At the time, I merely brushed the thought aside; it just seemed way out of my reach. Nevertheless, despite the many doubts holding me back, I found myself constantly thinking about it.

Was I good enough? How do I even apply? What would I need to get there? How should I begin? Could my parents afford it? Then one night, like many similar nights where I would sit at my desk worrying about my future, I decided that enough was enough – it was time to cast my doubts aside and just go for it. I penned down a list of targets and goals I wanted to achieve – little stepping-stones, which would bring me closer and closer to my ultimate goal. That was my moment of realisation. No one heard me say, “I commit!” There was no applause, just a quiet commitment to give it my all.

Of course, getting into Cambridge is always easier said than done. At that time, it seemed like such a long shot. How was a mediocre student like me going to stand out? Granted, things did not change overnight, but once I had committed myself, slowly but surely everything began to change. Doors that had always seemed shut began to open up. Opportunities arose seemingly out of nowhere. In short, everything just started falling into place.

Of course, the ride was not all smooth sailing. There were many obstacles I faced along the way and a fair share of criticism as well. Some people said I was crazy and foolish for deciding to take seven subjects for A-levels. I was not allowed to do more than four in college, so I had to study three on my own and teach myself from scratch. Sometimes it felt like the odds were stacked against me.

However, everything paid off in the end, and I was satisfied with being enrolled into Cambridge. In truth, the real victory had taken place many years before; on a quiet night in the privacy of my room, I had decided to put my fears aside, stop holding back, and brace myself for one supreme effort.

On a personal level, being enrolled into Cambridge was a fulfillment of a dream and the culmination of years of hard work. On a more concrete

level, Cambridge is a very stimulating place academically; you are given the opportunity to engage in intellectual debate and discussion with some of the brightest minds in their field.

Cambridge is also full of enriching, quirky traditions. Some of the memorable experiences I have had while in Cambridge include mooting in front of Lord Walker, one of the highest judges in the UK; punting down the Cam; signing the Wren Book during matriculation, the same book Isaac Newton signed when he first entered Cambridge; meeting the Chief Justice of the United States; debating in the Cambridge Union Chamber, which has played host to thousands of famous speakers; and rowing in the May Bumps, the main inter-collegiate annual rowing race.

Pursuing a dream can at times seem like a daunting task, but it was also the most satisfying time of my life. Having a dream and being passionate about it felt amazing. I had a goal in life and was alive every moment along the way towards achieving it. You do not need to be extraordinary to achieve your dreams – I certainly was not – for all you truly need is passion.

*You do not need to be extraordinary
to achieve your dreams – I certainly was not
– for all you truly need is passion.*



My Baywatch Experience

Yeo Jie Ming, 21, is currently studying medicine at Imperial College London. When she is not buried underneath a heap of medical textbooks, she enjoys swimming, running and hiking. She lives by the motto 'Life is either a great adventure or nothing'.

For me, the period after SPM was one of utter confusion. I loved learning and discovering, but I hated rote learning. Thus, I was in a state of ecstasy the moment I handed in my exam papers, and I partied non-stop for the first two weeks post-SPM. Come December, however, most of my friends were already busy packing for college. By December's end, all that was left of them were their silhouettes as they slowly dispersed to different destinations in pursuit of their ambitions.

It was a wake-up call for me; this was no time for Bacardis and uncoordinated disco jiggles! I needed to get back on the route towards medical school. After considering several pre-university options, I decided to sign up for the 18-month A-levels programme at Kolej Yayasan UEM.

When the SPM results were released in March, I did well enough to consider applying for scholarships and new doors began opening up for me. Finally, I accepted a scholarship to do my A-levels at Abbey College, Cambridge.

The programme would only commence in September, so I had six months to kill. Reminiscing upon how much I enjoyed being a member of the lifesaving society in KYUEM spurred me to contact the Life Saving Society Malaysia

(LSSM) and enquire about signing up for a professional lifesaving course. After attending a Life Saving Sport Workshop at INTI College organised by the INTI Life Saving and Swimming Club, I decided that it would be fun to spend my remaining time improving my swimming skills and learning about tows and throws. Despite the high-pitched objections from my mum who insisted that swimming full-time for six months would turn me into a female Hulk, I signed up for a Life Saving Training course in Penang.

It was a rather unconventional thing to do, I admit. My decision was met with raised eyebrows and stifled sniggers when I told several acquaintances about it – most of them were in the midst of more ‘useful’ occupations, such as attending a pre-university course or taking a gap year to deworm orphans. But I remained stout in my decision: for six months, I woke up at the crack of dawn every single day, went to the swimming pool at the Bukit Mertajam Country Club, and subjected myself to four continuous hours of elective torture from my instructor.

Completing the lifesaving course was not an easy feat. Although I was somewhat athletic in my school days, I was never a keen swimmer, being more of a runner and a bowler. Apart from the cardiovascular stress and muscular aches caused by the rigorous training sessions, I had to learn about various lifesaving techniques including towing, throwing a line, and emergency rescue techniques such as CPR and the Heimlich manoeuvre. Synchronising swimming and saving someone’s life can be quite challenging, especially for someone like me whose motor coordination leaves much to be desired.

Oh, and it certainly did not help that I was the only Pamela Anderson (minus the chest) amongst a herd of David Hasselhoffs in this version of Baywatch. I had to endure sexist remarks and an extremely deflated ego, thanks to the boys who out swam me nine out of ten times due to their testosterone surges, abundant mitochondria advantage, and sturdy physiques.

The towing training sessions could not be described as female-friendly as well. Being the lightest trainee, I was used as the ‘victim’ for both old and new trainees. It involved being strapped beneath the rock-hard upper arms of some very sweaty men and dragged across a distance of at least 50 metres in the

swimming pool countless times a day, all the time spluttering and gasping for air as an inevitable consequence of their inept lifesaving skills. Not my idea of fun.

Before the final assessment that would enable me to qualify as a trained lifeguard, I had to watch the pool for three hours per day, which was an experience in itself. Firstly, I never fully knew how boring it is to stare at a water-filled tank for several hours straight. Secondly, I learnt that breath-holding competitions are a fad amongst kids these days. Once, when this kid disappeared underwater for more than 3 minutes, I conducted the whole “Call out to victim, call for assistance, jump into pool” operation only to discover that a pointless, neuron-destroying contest was underway, which left everyone – except me, of course – in stitches of laughter.

Despite all my trials and tribulations, those six months were one of the most enjoyable periods of my life. I made new friends, gained unforgettable experiences, and the novelty of devoting a significant proportion of my time to something outside of academia was refreshing. In fact, the sense of accomplishment I felt when I received the Bronze Medallion and certificate of accomplishment from the International Life Saving Federation was comparable to that which I experienced upon receiving my string of As in SPM!

Most importantly, it taught me many important lessons in life: those of teamwork, of perseverance, and of humility – even if it did give me rather hypertrophied deltoids and a slightly smug “I told you so!” from the woman who bore me.

Most importantly, it taught me many important lessons in life: those of teamwork, of perseverance, and of humility – even if it did give me rather hypertrophied deltoids and a slightly smug “I told you so!” from the woman who bore me.



To Err is Human, to Learn Divine

Yeoh Chen Chow, 29, is an alumnus of Cornell University, and is currently a Product Manager at JobStreet.com. He is passionate about helping young people discover their potential.

“After marking through your essay, we felt that you should enrol in ENGLB 115: English for a Later Bilingual. It will be a special class for eight of you, and we will have a professor focusing specifically on all of you to improve your command of English. The English language is crucial for your study here.”

That was what I was told during my second day in my alma mater, and that placed me among the eight weakest students in English among 3,000 freshmen.

It was good exposure for me to have a dedicated professor spending one hour a week, on a one-to-one basis, on correcting my pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. She made me write six pages in English every week.

Looking back, it was one of the major turning points for me. And even before that, when I was doing my A-levels in Singapore, my Civics tutor, Dr. Ho Weng Kin, and my assistant boarding master, Mr. Leong Wei Shin, went out of their way to guide me. So did my lecturers at INTEC – Mrs. Ranee, Datin Minda, etc.

I wish I had more exposure to English much earlier in my life. During my high school days, speaking in English was viewed as ‘showing off’. Thus, I hardly had opportunities to use English, except with a few teachers who were

willing to use English with me. One's environment sets the surroundings for one's learning opportunities, though I have no regrets going to Jit Sin High School, which was a reputable educational institution. I only wished that there was more emphasis on the English Language. We were trained to score A1 in SPM English, and we did get the A1, but we certainly were not sufficiently fluent in the language to comfortably converse with others.

I shall never forget the days when I carried a dictionary everywhere I went, or the days when I was trying to prepare for my SAT. It was torturous, as my command of the language was certainly below par. I shall never forget the days when I was just sitting in for sparring sessions in debate, trying to copy the few words that I could roughly catch, and then checking my dictionary religiously everyday.

It was those little daily steps that enabled me to give speeches in English today. The many years that I struggled were a great lesson learnt. It was really tough, and I could have given up at any moment.

Today, quite a few years down the road, I wish I had a magical pill to help fellow Malaysians who would like to be better English speakers/users. I wish I could create a greater awareness, so that students could have a better platform to learn English. I wish I could motivate those who are trying hard to learn English to continue learning and not give up.

Upon reflection, I am indebted to so many people, be it lecturers or friends, who tried to motivate me to strengthen my command of the language. They had faith in me, although the odds were stacked against me and the fruits of their labour were not too obvious, especially in the early days.

English helps us to communicate with others, and also enables us to learn from the abundant resources online or offline. Without a strong command of the language, daily communication will be affected. Productivity plummets, causing constant frustration.

To those who are still struggling with the language, or those who have not paid much attention to it, do start now! According to a survey by Jobstreet.com, the main reason for fresh graduates to not get a job is due to their poor command of English. It takes a fundamental switch in our mentality and

real commitment for us to continuously work hard in our singular focus on improving our command of the language. Above all, do not give up.

If one were to ask me what my biggest transformation has been since I left high school, it is undoubtedly my command of the English language. While my English is nowhere near perfect, it enables me to explore the world, and learn from the wide reservoir of knowledge. Language is the enabler.

To sum it up, I would like to urge all readers, especially those of you who do not have a solid command of English, to take the initiative to learn the language. I learnt it quite late in my life, which is something I regret. It will be much better if you can get this right while you are still young.

Go English!

While my English is nowhere near perfect, it enables me to explore the world, and learn from the wide reservoir of knowledge. Language is the enabler.



Taking Chances

Zain HD fancies the fine things in life, but often finds himself meddling with the opposite. He chose not to practice Law, and is currently a marketing and events project manager. He is saving up to travel to Kampala, Jerusalem, Fortazela, and Lyon.

I started working when I was fifteen, and I have had over fifteen jobs since. Carpet salesman, retail assistant, banquet waiter, home typist, personal assistant, driving instructor, music performer, errands boy, hotel doorman, cafe staff, office clerk, tuition teacher, master of ceremony. Some jobs I was told to leave unceremoniously, some jobs I was asked to stay with better pay.

As a home tutor, I told my students to get out there and work during the school holidays. It is from there that you might discover what kind of job, or life, that you do not want to have, as opposed to what you think you want. I believe the more you are exposed to the world, the more you will find out about various professions and dimensions available to you. So it is not unusual for you to change or alter directions and ambitions as you go along, and it is important not to see it as quitting or falling short.

Weeks after submitting my application for a place in a public university, I decided to switch to Law. As a result, I entered university a year later than all of my peers. During my degree, I did three brief internships at a legal department of a multinational corporation, a world-renowned humanitarian organisation, and an impressive law firm in Kuala Lumpur.

I know that I do not regret the time I fell asleep at the law firm library in front of my boss's office, rendering myself semi-conscious by banging my head on the glass table while reading something I actually found interesting. Nor do I regret not claiming more than two weeks of pay for the work I felt I did not deserve. I do not regret studying Law or not getting an A throughout my Law degree. I especially do not regret turning down a scholarship to do it abroad because I wanted to be around to watch my small sisters grow up. I know that I absolutely do not want to be a lawyer.

Today, I am a freelance project manager and I run my own collective, RandomAlphabets, which I started only six months after I left university. I often receive invitations to work on certain ideas, or companies seek to engage my services. At almost any social gathering or event I go to in KL, I meet someone who seems to already know of me, the collective I started, the work it does, and they usually have good things to say of it. Both the collective and what I do now have no direct relation to the field of study I devoted five years to in university.

Though the collective and its cause are mine, people's expectation and impression of it is beyond my control. It is one that I sometimes get exhausted of entertaining, and worst still, struggle to live up to. I see that managing and battling with expectations continues from school to university to work-life.

Last night, I received a personal phone call from the head of department of a fairly large and conservative company. He had never read about me in the newspapers, nor heard of the bizarre projects I had initiated. I had only met him once in a group meeting where I shared my views, and based on that he felt I was suitable to work for him. He offered me a job, more convinced than myself that I was suitable for the position of a writer. While I admit that the uncertainties of the offer were worrying, accepting it was a start. What I did know is that had I sat around pondering endlessly on what to do, this opportunity would have never fallen onto my lap.

Here is the gist of my winding road. I did a number of things since I left the conventional path of university, and by default began my own education, which forced me to learn a great deal. But unconventionality should not be

restricted to education, and that is fine by me. Do not let others dictate their norms on you, even when you are unsure of what to do. It is okay to not know what you want to do in life – just at least know what you do not want to do.

After five years of echoing that message, it is neither ironic nor surprising to me that I still do not know what to do. However, the simple act of speaking up, making things happen, and getting things done will open more doors for you. After all, the first step to finding out what lies beyond your boundaries is to challenge yourself to anything. Who knows, you might actually find something that you love doing.

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So you want to be a Documentary Filmmaker?

Zan Azlee, 32, is a journalist, documentary filmmaker, writer and academic. He runs Fat Bidin Media (<http://www.fatbidin.com>).

Currently preparing his PhD proposal, he holds a Bachelor of Accountancy (Hons) from UiTM Shah Alam and a Masters in Broadcast Journalism from Staffordshire University (UK).

Five heavily armed and hugely built Lebanese soldiers grabbed me by the arms and dragged me out of the small coffee shop. Shouting in Arabic, they also grabbed my bag and my camera. I was shocked as they shoved me across the road to their military checkpoint.

As we entered the premise, another soldier ransacked my bag. I was then brought into an empty room, where they sat me down and left me alone. I was trembling when their superior came in holding my passport.

“Where are you from? Who are you?” he barked.

How the hell did I get myself into a situation like this? At that moment, I realised I have come such a long way...

In 2000, I graduated with an Accountancy degree. However, what I really loved doing was writing and telling stories. A newspaper company was willing to give me a chance to do that, and as soon as I graduated, I started working for them and thus began my love affair with journalism.

After a year, I decided to do my Masters in Broadcast Journalism at Staffordshire University. It was there that my interest developed even more, and I found that broadcasting was my calling.

I came back to Malaysia and got a job at the news desk of a local television station. After a while, I decided to quit working at NTV7 and go freelance. It was a bold move since I did not have any regular clients, so I worked hard. I grabbed any project that came my way, from the ones that I really wanted, such as journalism and documentary productions, to those that bored me, such as technical manual copywriting.

During that same period, I started producing my own short documentary films; most were lousy, but several were good enough to be screened publicly. I also began lecturing at a local university to keep in touch with the theoretical side of whatever I was doing.

In 2006, I decided to make my first feature length documentary, *The Look-East Project*. I went to Terengganu to find out how the women there led their lives. At that time, I was fascinated by something known as solo-journalism. It was a trend in countries like the USA and Britain, whereby broadcast journalists would produce, shoot, write, direct, and narrate their own stories as a one-man-production-team. It took me a few months to finish my project and by early 2007, I had myself a 75-minute feature documentary film that was eventually broadcasted on air.

The light at the end of the tunnel was now becoming much more visible. With the money I made from that sale, I decided to make another feature length documentary. This time, I decided to go a bit further. I titled the film *I'm Muslim Too!* and went to four countries in the Middle-East (Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan) to see how young people lived in their respective countries. The film was also shot solo-journalism style.

I went to Iran and interviewed Arsames, a heavy metal band. Then I headed to Syria to search for the Hezbollah video game *Special Force*, and to Jordan to visit the annual Jerash Arts Festival. I also went to Beirut in Lebanon to experience war and to see how Palestinian refugee children spend their days.

When I got into Lebanon, there were military checkpoints lining every

street. Tanks and soldiers were everywhere. Turn on the television and you would see live coverage of bombings and shootings just 20 kilometres from the city – it was terrible and it scared me.

“Hey! Answer my question! Who are you?”

The soldier’s shout jolted me up. I was still trembling and could barely speak.

“I am a teacher from Malaysia,” I squeaked, trying to sound as harmless as I could.

You see, we had stopped at a coffee shop just before the Lebanese border. Across the road was a military checkpoint. During times of war, footage of checkpoints and army bases are prohibited for security reasons, but I wanted a picture as a souvenir. I thought I could sneak a snap through the coffee shop curtains. However, soldiers stormed in after a few minutes. In my hastiness, I had forgotten to turn off the flash function on my camera.

“Delete this picture!” he ordered as he threw my digital camera onto my lap.

To cut a long story short, I deleted the pictures, crossed the border safely, and took a flight back to Malaysia.

Besides making documentary films, I am also a freelance video journalist for international news channel Al Jazeera and a Dutch TV station called VPRO TV; I also provide consultancy and conduct documentary workshops. I am now getting jobs and projects that I want to do and have the liberty to decline those I do not want to do, and I am definitely happy with my progress.

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However, what I really loved doing was
writing and telling stories.*

Acknowledgements

This compilation would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of all members of the Project What's After SPM team. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of the following people:

Gabrielle Chong, whose vision and passion were instrumental in bringing the team together and getting the project off the ground;

Kimberley Ho, whose diligence helped ensure the final stages of the project were brought to fruition and commitment never wavered;

Goh Jing Pei, who patiently attended endless meetings with publishers and assiduously spread the word about the project;

Tara Thean, whose journalistic eye and intuition were integral in the writing of this book and who handled hurdles with grace;

Charis Loke, who was the creative voice of the team, and oversaw all aspects of the design process, from the nitty-gritty to the large;

Yeoh Chen Chow, who provided numerous contacts for publishers and contributors, was instrumental in setting out the initial direction of the project, and tirelessly assisted us in our publicity efforts;

Michelle Tam, who provided order in the overwhelming task of selecting and editing hundreds of essays, and sent hundreds of patient emails to our contributors;

Benjamin Ng, whose decisiveness and wisdom were invaluable in the production of the book, and whose advice we could not have done without.

The combined efforts of the editorial team were instrumental towards the success of Project What's After SPM, and we would like to acknowledge the contributions of these members:

Chief Editor *Michelle Tam*, whose calm temperament and penchant for perfectionism guided and steered the exacting editing process;

Assistant Editors *Akil Yunus* and *Wong Boon Ken*, who crafted compelling titles, efficiently filtered large batches of essays in record time, and were helping hands to the very end;

Aaron Paul, whose incisive eye and frank evaluations helped to separate the wheat from the chaff;

Kenneth Chaw, whose dedication drove him to fulfill editorial responsibilities even as he juggled the demands of a concurrent internship;

Michelle Chun and *Jasmine Yow*, whose ready assistance in the initial stages of editing are much appreciated.

Finally, we would also like to offer our regards and blessings to *Roshan Thiran*, who enabled this project to come alive. Our heartfelt thanks to the Leaderonomics team, particularly to *James Lee*, *Lisanne Yeoh* and *Esther Tham* for their coordination and support. We also like to thank *Anas Zubedy* for his advice and encouragement, as well as those who have supported us in any respect during the promotion and completion of this project. Last but not least, we want to thank our contributors for sharing their inspiring stories.

About Leaderonomics

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”

At Leaderonomics, there is a strong belief that everyone needs to be a leader. Leadership is not exclusive to business CEOs or country politicians. Parents are leaders. If you lead a community project, you are a leader. Everyone is in fact, a leader. But not everyone is given the training, development and access to enable them to become the leader they were meant to be. Everyone needs support and expertise to build their leadership capabilities and grow into better leaders in all area of their lives.

And so, at Leaderonomics, we have taken up this challenge to provide everyone with access to leadership development, even if they cannot afford it. And so the dream, beginning with Malaysia and Indonesia and other developing countries, is to provide the world with leadership development, from birth to death. For everyone.

The Leaderonomics Vision

“Growing People into Leaders, Building Communities through Love, Transforming the Nation”

At Leaderonomics, we believe that it is crucial to:

- Set new goals to challenge, bond and propel all people to develop into leaders, irrespective of racial, regional or social background in all fields of endeavor
- Play an active role in helping the world’s leaders – of all ages, classes and ethnicities – to adapt and meet dramatic changes in our natural and synthetic environments and to help them grow and develop as leaders
- Establish leadership – in all its forms – transforming the minds and hearts of leaders to create a just, free and caring society

- Aim for leadership and development all across the nations

Our vision is to seek to grow people into leaders, build affectionate communities, and transform human societies. This vision is anchored by the Golden Rule that we can only prosper if we protect the prosperity of those around us. As members of one vast community, we want to play our role as agents of civilisation by creating, redeeming and sustaining life in all spheres of the global society. Our vision is centered on helping everyone build their leadership capabilities and helping them grow into community leaders that make a difference in the world. We strongly believe that leadership will help transform communities and societies into a better, fairer and more caring society.

So how do we do what we do?

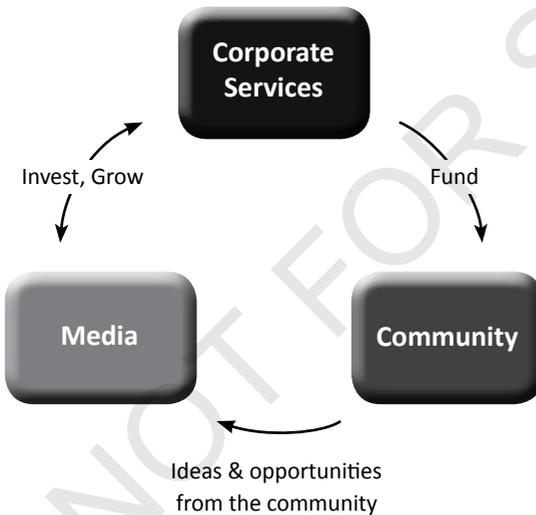
With the intention to not only build leaders in the corporate world but amongst the young and the underserved communities as well, we decided to build a social enterprise – one that funds its community initiatives through revenues generated by providing corporate services. Part of the reason for this was that both Leaderonomics Founders (Roshan Thiran & Ang Hui Ming) did not want to become a dependant NGO that had to “beg, borrow or steal” to ensure their vision of changing the world through leadership materialised.

And so, Leaderonomics was set up as a zero-net income organisation, which provides professional services to corporations in managing learning and development, talent management, and operational effectiveness. The proceeds from these services go to the funding of developmental and growth projects for youth and under-privileged communities. These developmental efforts are the key focus – to build leaders of tomorrow, who will transform nations for the betterment of the human race. This include free youth camps, our Innovest programme where we fund those with no access to capital, and our numerous community “Leaderonomics Gives Back” programmes.

The diagram below describes how each part of Leaderonomics is built to help support the other parts – and ensure there is sustainable funding for the community aspects of Leaderonomics.

The Leaderonomics Way

We are a social enterprise that uses its proceeds to fund development and growth projects for the youth and challenged communities in the world.



Corporate Services

- Learning & Development
- Sounding Board
- Events & Conferences
- Academy
- Recruiting

Media

- E-Learning
- Technology
- Publications
- Leaderonomics TV

Community

- Youth
- Entrepreneurship
- In the Community
- Innovest
- Careernomics

Why you need to get involved with Leaderonomics

We are acutely aware that such dreams and visions cannot be achieved alone. In reality, we are nothing by ourselves. It is by mutual encouragement and communal execution that we can carry the hope that one day we will see the fruition of what we envisioned. We believe that with each of your encouragement and support, we will be able to execute our vision of change by:

“Growing people into leaders, building communities through love, and transforming our nation”. This is our vision, and we hope it will be your too.

We need organisations and companies to partner with us and use our corporate services (including our training and consulting services) so that we can earn a profit which can be used for our youth and community work. We need the help of individuals and organisations to support the enormous work that has to be done for the poor, orphaned and under-privileged communities in developing countries. Numerous individual help is required in teaching these kids, in supporting community work and in physically being present.

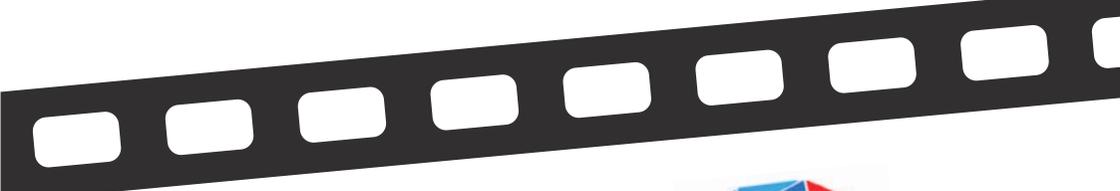
As such, we earnestly seek your partnership in this journey, to make this vision a reality. As our current CEO, Roshan Thiran repeatedly articulates, “it takes a community to build a leader.” Likewise, we know, it takes leaders to transform our nation. And so we hope to help you be the best leader you can be, in the hope that you will go out and help us change the world.

To learn more about partnership opportunities and how you can be part of the Leaderonomics vision and dream, visit **www.leaderonomics.com** or send an email to: **people@leaderonomics.com**

All the best in your leadership journey!

Warm regards,

The Dreamers @ Leaderonomics




The Leaderonomics Show

An online talk show that centers around building leaders.

Hosted by Roshan Thiran, the CEO of Leaderonomics. The guests on this show are all natural leaders, mentors and teachers from respected companies.
<http://leaderonomics.com/theleaderonomicsshow/>

OUR SERVICES

COMMUNITY



MEDIA

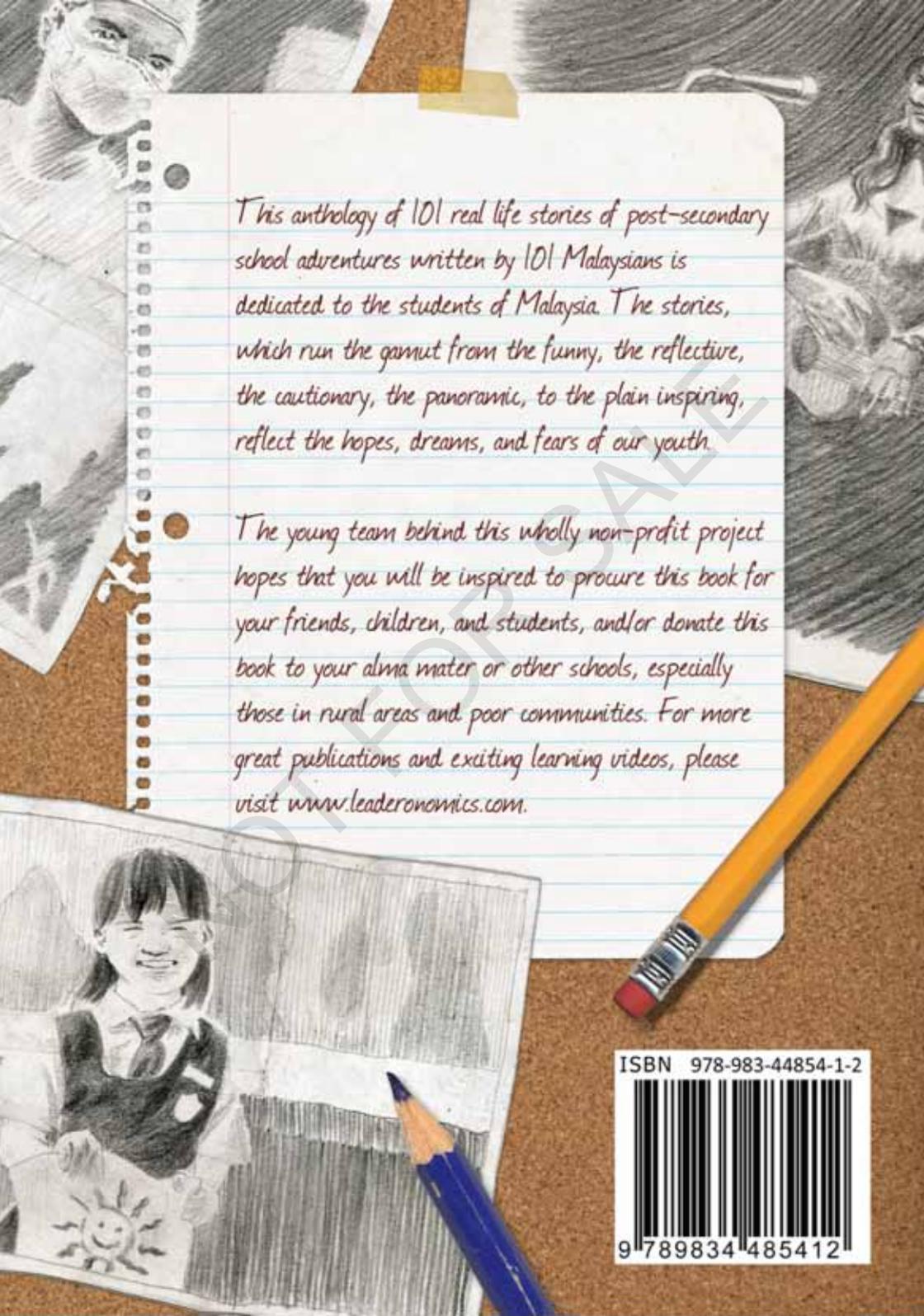
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This anthology of 101 real life stories of post-secondary school adventures written by 101 Malaysians is dedicated to the students of Malaysia. The stories, which run the gamut from the funny, the reflective, the cautionary, the panoramic, to the plain inspiring, reflect the hopes, dreams, and fears of our youth.

The young team behind this wholly non-profit project hopes that you will be inspired to procure this book for your friends, children, and students, and/or donate this book to your alma mater or other schools, especially those in rural areas and poor communities. For more great publications and exciting learning videos, please visit www.leaderonomics.com.

ISBN 978-983-44854-1-2



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