

The three National University of Singapore graduates had a less than conventional education path — two were from the Normal (Technical) stream and one was a madrasah student. **HARIZ BAHARUDIN** (harizbah@sph.com.sg) finds out more about their life journeys

From NT student to budding teacher



If his mother were still alive today, Mr David Hoe, 28, would want to tell her: "I think I might have done you proud".

Mr Hoe's mother died from illness when he was just 12.

As a child, Mr Hoe spent a lot of time with his mother, who got divorced when he was just a toddler. To make ends meet, the pair would sell packets of tissue in hawker centres.

After losing his mother, Mr Hoe lived with his father, who was then a driver.

Growing up with his father was not the easiest of experiences, Mr Hoe said.

"I disliked my dad for all sorts of reasons and even blamed him for splitting up the family because of his drinking. We also quarrelled often," he said.

As he grew up, however, Mr Hoe became more appreciative of his father's sacrifices.

While he is sad that his mother will not be there for his commencement ceremony at the National University of Singapore (NUS) next week, Mr David said there is a reason to be happy, too.

His father, who has never attended any of his graduation ceremonies,

will be there.

"No matter what happened in the past, I am glad that he will be there because he has supported me to the best of his ability and I want to honour him," said the Ministry of Education (MOE) scholarship holder.

Graduating from NUS is a milestone in Mr Hoe's non-conventional education journey.

When he was in Sec 1, the Normal (Technical) (NT) stream student realised, after helping some of his classmates, that his dream was to teach.

DISAPPOINTMENT

But reality sank in when Mr Hoe checked MOE's website and found out that he needed at least five O-level passes to apply to become a teacher.

NT stream students do not sit for O levels; they go on to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) instead.

"I was devastated. It felt like the world crashed down on me as any glimpse of the path I wanted to take was gone," he said.

Refusing to give up, Mr Hoe, who was one of Singapore's top NT stream students in 2005, contacted then-Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam about his predicament.

The minister replied and Mr Hoe got the chance to take the O levels, but there was a catch as he had to repeat Secondary 3 and 4 in the Express stream.

However, Mr Hoe did not mind it at all, saying: "It was not an issue even though it meant that I would be older than the rest."

He did well and eventually secured places in NUS, Singapore Management University and Nanyang Technological University.

Mr Hoe chose the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in NUS.

He said: "I wanted to position myself in a place where I can keep learning to learn," adding that as a budding teacher, he had to be "as hungry to learn".

To supplement this desire to learn, Mr Hoe took on multiple internships, even though his future as a teacher was secured with the scholarship.

These included internships with Microsoft, DBS Bank and even a medical consultancy firm while he was an exchange student in Mexico.

Mr Hoe is also an active youth leader, initiating the "I Am Talented" programme which motivates under-performing students to discover their own talents.

DIDN'T GIVE UP: Former Normal (Technical) student David Hoe is a Ministry of Education scholarship holder and intends to teach.

TNP PHOTOS: JEREMY LONG

He is involved in a mentorship programme called "Tmentors", which pairs secondary school students with university students.

Recently, Mr Hoe was the only student appointed to serve on the National Taskforce on Youth and Drugs Committee chaired by the Second Minister for Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs, Mr Masagos Zulkifli, and the Minister of State for Education and Communications and Information, Ms Sim Ann.

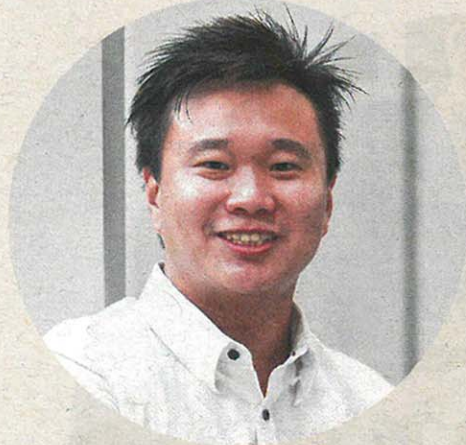
The committee seeks to improve Singapore's anti-drug laws and to steer youth away from drugs.

"I felt privileged and humbled to be able to represent young people, and it was a great honour," he said.

His story has touched many lives.

One of Mr Hoe's childhood friends, graduate student Melvin Tay, 24, said: "A lot of people know of his childhood and how he persevered. He did not let that get the better of him or use it as an excuse."

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MET HIS OBJECTIVES: Mr Ang Jin Hui.

'The sky has no limit for him'

He had two goals when he first entered the National University of Singapore (NUS): to obtain a good honours degree and to attend the NUS College in Silicon Valley (NCSV).

Four years later, Mr Ang Jin Hui, 28, who will be leaving NUS with a Bachelor of Computing with Honours in Electronic Commerce, has achieved all that and then some.

Not only did he complete his degree and attain a minor in technopreneurship from the year-long programme at the NCSV, Mr Ang also graduated from the prestigious University Scholars Programme (USP).

"It is a dream come true to graduate from NUS, and more importantly from the University Scholars Programme," he said.

The USP takes in only 180 out of about 1,000 applicants annually. Students there do a set of interdisciplinary modules outside of their curriculum. Mr Ang took modules as diverse as Evolution and Human Diversity, Cyberart, and Population Aging and Health.

THREE PROGRAMMES

"With the encouragement from my professors, I was given the opportunity to complete three NUS programmes. Usually, students just do one, but I am glad I did it," he added.

There was nothing usual about Mr Ang's route to university.

After obtaining an aggregate of 146 in his PSLE, Mr Ang went to the Normal (Technical) stream in Bukit Panjang Government High School. He then spent two years at the Institute of Technical Education before going to Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

There, Mr Ang graduated with an almost perfect Grade Point Average of 3.97 out of 4 and got a place at NUS.

Throughout his academic life, Mr Ang impressed many of his tutors.

"He demonstrated that in the search for educational excellence, the sky has no limit," said Professor Low Cheng Hock, who is the former chairman of the School Advisory Committee of Bukit Panjang Government High School and a personal mentor to Mr Ang.

'Madrasah students are just as good as others'

Miss Siti Nur Diyanah Hardy has a dream for madrasah students.

"My ultimate hope is that one day, a madrasah student does well in school and nobody asks them for an interview because it is no longer a big deal," said the 23-year-old, who studied at the Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah.

Big deal or not, there is no denying that her academic achievements are impressive.

Miss Diyanah is the first Malay student to graduate from the National University of Singapore (NUS) with a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree with first-class honours in social work.

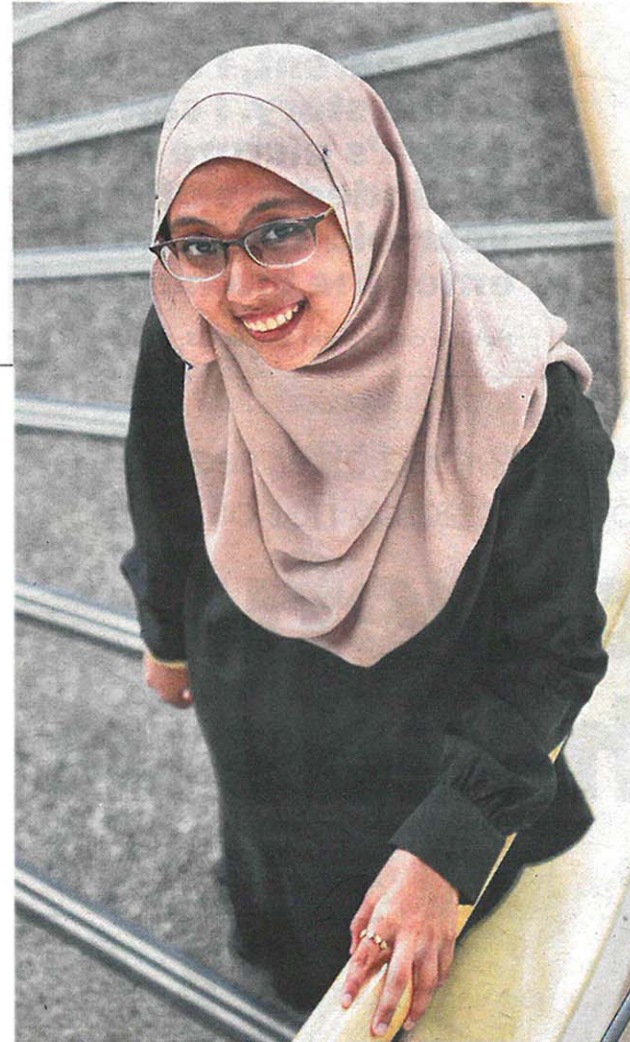
After spending 12 years at Al-Maarif, where she did her O and A levels, Miss Diyanah made the decision to go to a secular school for further studies.

On this decision, she said: "As much as I value the Islamic education I got, I was looking towards social service and NUS was best aligned with my interest."

She added that her parents were supportive of her decision to follow her passion.

When Miss Diyanah first entered university, she hardly expected to do well because there were so many bright minds around her.

"When I first joined NUS, I had this mentality that I was just a madrasah



STERLING RESULTS: Miss Siti Nur Diyanah Hardy obtained a final Cumulative Average Point of 4.52 out of 5.

girl in university full of students previously from really great schools," she said humbly, adding that this made her feel like she was not good enough.

However, Miss Diyanah did very well in her first semester. She continued performing well consistently throughout her four years in university and obtained a final Cumulative Average Point of 4.52 out of 5.

IMPRESSIVE

Miss Diyanah's grades have impressed many of her lecturers.

Dr Rosaleen Ow, who is the department head of social work at NUS, said she was "a delightful student to teach and supervise".

Getting stellar results was not something Miss Diyanah was especially fixated upon, though. She feels that her best time in NUS was when she took her learning outside of school.

Together with the NUS Muslim Society, she helped organise a 14-day youth expedition programme to Cambodia.

Over there, she and her team worked together with Mercy Relief to

educate young children about the importance of basic hygiene and clean water.

Going on this trip cemented Miss Diyanah's commitment towards social work.

"It defined where I went from there, so it was quite a turning point," she said.

Miss Diyanah said she will always be thankful for her time at Al-Maarif.

So to give back to the madrasah, she initiated a mentorship programme, Maarif Maths Mentoring, with a fellow ex-schoolmate.

When asked what needs to be changed to realise her dream of seeing more madrasah students excel in school, she hopes they will not make the same mistake she did at the start of her university career.

"Do not assume that just because you are from a madrasah you cannot do well as any other students. Other people might think it is so, but you know it is not true," she said.

"So do not listen to those voices in your head and just pull through".