



**RUNNING THE PROFESSORIAL MARATHON,
TAKING RISKS ALONG THE WAY:
A PROFILE OF PROFESSOR BERNARD TAN**

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Bernard Tan began his career as a faculty member at the National University of Singapore in 1997. Today he is Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education) and Professor in the Department of Information Systems.



1. FORMATIVE YEARS

Bernard was born in Singapore in 1964. He attended St Anthony's Boys School, then St Joseph's Institution to study for the 'O'-Level examinations, and Catholic Junior College for the 'A'-Level examinations. In those days, Bernard recalls fondly, the three schools had an easy-going culture, not what one might describe as competitive or academically challenging. His junior college, for instance, had such low expectations of his performance that his teacher congratulated him when he received just over 50 out of 100 marks for his first physics test. His parents, Chinese-educated up to secondary school level, took a relaxed view of his education and also did not put very much pressure on him. Unburdened by any strong ambition or expectation of success, Bernard naturally found school-life to be great fun.

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Reflection 1: *Were you academically inclined as a young student? What sort of encouragement did you receive from the schools you attended and from your family? Before attending university, did you ever think you would become an academic?*

In 1985, Bernard was admitted to the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Science. Although he did not have as strong an academic foundation as his peers who had studied at top junior colleges, he did not feel disadvantaged and, in fact, continued to enjoy a mostly carefree life on campus. Like most other male Singaporean freshmen, he experienced an exhilarating sense of freedom having just completed 2½ years of mandatory military service, or 'National Service'. Campus life offered many opportunities for having fun. And in his first two years at the university, Bernard never missed a 'jam and hop', the highlight of social life for the NUS student body.

Reflection 2: *What was your own experience of campus life as a university student? Do you reflect on those experiences to understand the psychology of your students today? If so, has it helped you in your teaching?*

Amidst all this fun, Bernard did not neglect his studies. As a student in the Department of Information Systems and Computer Science (DISCS), he took courses from a common curriculum in the first year and, based on his first-year results, was subsequently streamed into computer science. As he wanted to pursue his studies in an interdisciplinary programme (there were very few in those days), Bernard appealed to the Head of Department to switch to information systems (IS). His appeal was granted.

Reflection 3: *What advice would you generally give to students who want to switch courses?*

It was while taking courses in IS that he met Professor KS Raman, who would later have an important influence on his career. As a teacher, Raman was very traditional. He did not supply his students with notes, but expected them to make their own notes from his lectures.

Reflection 4: *In today's classroom, there are many presentation technologies available for teaching and learning, including the very popular and often abused PowerPoint slides. In your experience as a student and teacher, what have you observed to be some of the worst and best examples of how presentation technology has been used in the classroom? What should we make of 'traditional' methods of teaching that are unassisted by IT in today's classroom?*

In his Honours year, when DISCS students were required to do a final-year project that had a research component, Bernard was assigned to Raman for supervision.

Reflection 5: *How is the Honours thesis or project supervision carried out in your department? Is there a need for improvement?*

During this time, Bernard started to think more seriously about his future career and applied for jobs at Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS). He was also offered a job at the Central Provident Fund Board in Singapore, where he had done an internship.

Reflection 6: *As a student, did you ever do an internship? If so, what impact did it have on your career choice and prospects? Do you now encourage your students to do an internship? Do you have any success and horror stories to share?*

Raman, however, encouraged him to go into research. Up to this point, Bernard had never considered becoming an academic, and certainly not one at NUS. Raman's justification for this advice was rather unexpected: Observing that Bernard did not perform as well in IS courses compared to other courses, Raman argued, perhaps in jest, that Bernard should continue studying IS to improve his mastery of the subject. More importantly, Raman was able to convince Bernard that he had the potential to do very good research in IS. Bernard took his advice, enrolled as a Masters student, and ended up as his research assistant (RA) in 1989.

Many years later, when he won the NUS Young Researcher Award in 2002, Bernard made it a point to thank Raman, who – in turn – admitted to him, light-heartedly, that he had asked Bernard to continue his studies simply because he needed an RA at the time and Bernard seemed to be able to do the job. Raman's advice, regardless of his initial motivations, had nevertheless given him enough confidence at the time to pursue research seriously.

Reflection 7: *Did you have an advisor or a mentor who encouraged you to become an academic? If so, what was the most convincing thing that they said to you?*

As Raman's RA, Bernard found himself working within an interdisciplinary environment. He visited many different libraries in the university to collect materials and became so immersed in the job that he was

able to memorize the call numbers of most of the key journals. More importantly, he learnt how to evaluate the quality of sources.

Reflection 8: *Have you worked with RAs? How would you describe your working relationship with them? What sort of 'training' or 'instruction' did they receive from you? Do you have any success and horror stories to share? Can there be a more systematic approach to training, deploying, supporting, and assessing RAs at the university level?*

Before too long, Bernard was able to submit a few articles that were accepted and published in leading journals, which was at the time rather uncommon for a graduate student at NUS. He was also able to get his Masters thesis on group support systems published.

Reflection 9: *Are graduate students in your department encouraged to present papers at conferences and to publish in high quality journals? If so, what kind of support do they have for doing this? What more should be done to prepare them for academic careers?*

From his own experience, Bernard today fully appreciates the importance of giving opportunities to students who are hardworking and willing to learn, even if they may not appear to be able to produce outstanding results in the first instance. Associate Professor Atreyi Kankanhalli, once a Ph.D. student under Bernard's supervision and now a colleague, describes Bernard as an 'excellent mentor'. A key lesson she learnt was

the need to analyze one's own work critically. Whenever we were writing up our research work for publication, he would always encourage me to make sure that the arguments presented are robust and foolproof such that no one (including reviewers) can poke holes in it.

She recalls how Bernard was always advising her

to build up my skills one step at a time and challenge myself to progress further. He takes a keen interest in the career development of his students. One specific example is in the area of professional service and reviewing where I progressed from reviewing conference to journal papers, to Associate Editor, Track Chair, and Senior Editor roles. In general, I have benefited from observing the way he planned his own career as he serves as a great role model.

Jason Chan, currently a doctoral student in the Department of Information, Operations, Management Sciences (IOMS) at Stern School of Business, New York University, wrote an undergraduate final-year thesis under Bernard's supervision in 2007 to 2008, and then worked as his research assistant from 2008 to 2009. During this time, they managed to do further research on the thesis and to co-publish it. Jason describes Bernard as 'a wonderful person to work with' and as someone who 'has played an important role in shaping who I am today'. He elaborates:

As a research supervisor, Bernard is prudent in providing advice on performing research. His approach is not to hold a student's hand all the time but to provide crucial feedback at appropriate moments. In my case, he would spend time with me regularly to discuss whether my research ideas and methodology are feasible while giving me space to be creative and opportunities to develop crucial problem solving skills on my own. Under his guidance, not only was I able to build up fundamental skills for performing research, I was also able to develop a research topic that truly interests me. Bernard is also a warm and encouraging friend. He reminded me that the success of great researchers often came after many failures, which motivated me to keep working on the problem and groomed my passion for research.

Reflection 10: *Have you ever been approached by students looking for guidance in pursuing academic careers? If so, what sort of assistance have you offered? More generally, do you offer informal career guidance to your students? Any success stories to share?*

Bernard believes he was fortunate to have come under Raman's positive influence. The professor was an active researcher at a time when NUS did not focus very much on research. Even though the university did not require it, Raman strongly believed in the value of doing good research. Most faculty at NUS in the 1980s and 1990s were doing small-scale research, publishing their work in what would today be considered less prestigious 'tier 3' and 'tier 4' journals. Raman looked for big projects. Courageously and often shamelessly, he approached universities in the United States to secure collaboration. Undaunted by the many unsuccessful attempts, he eventually succeeded in finding a partner at the University of Minnesota. Persistence paid off.

When Bernard was contemplating his Ph.D. studies, he was advised to do it at NUS because the university was starting to build up its graduate programmes. Naturally, there were, at the time, insufficient courses to make up a strong Ph.D. curriculum.

Reflection 11: *What are the principles that guide curriculum design in your department's Ph.D. programme? Are there aspects of this that can be improved?*

To make up for the inadequacies, NUS departments would sometimes send their graduate students, on an ad hoc basis, to partner universities overseas that offered relevant courses. In 1992, Bernard was sent to the University of Georgia in the US, an opportunity that he today considers to be an intellectual turning point in his life, since it was there that his interdisciplinary horizons were broadened. The coursework at Georgia was of high quality; though, compared to NUS, it was not as well structured and integrated. The university had a very collegial atmosphere and information was freely and widely shared. There was a lot of contact between students and professors, not least during the regular Friday drinking sessions that had become an institution.

Reflection 12: *How important is it for professors to cultivate an informal relationship with students outside of the classroom? What are some of the pros and cons of doing this? Any good practices to share?*

The students were fun loving. The university itself was very respectable. Its professors were good scholars working in an intensive research environment.

Bernard volunteered to conduct research experiments for his professors and was able to develop his skills in experiment design. By this time, he was quite sure that he wanted to be an academic. Under the supervision of Professor Richard Watson, he worked on a cross-cultural study on groupware (collaborative software designed to support groups of people engaged in a common activity to achieve common goals). While professors from other US universities, whom Bernard met at conferences, cautioned him against working on a cross-cultural topic that would be difficult to publish in top journals whose reviewers were mostly American, Watson – to his great credit – advised Bernard to be bold and advance his research in the confidence that it would produce valuable results that challenged conventional wisdom. Only by such acts of boldness and persistence can the field move forward. Indeed, in spite of a very difficult and lengthy review process, the study was eventually published in a leading journal. Bernard learnt from this experience that knowledge is socially constructed. Ideas that are not normally well received at first by a dominant community of scholars may find acceptance and even gain prestige if argued well. Any good paper, he believes, will find its home. But one has to be open and adaptive to disciplinary differences and persistent enough in finding this home.

Over the years, Watson has encouraged all his doctoral students to take the less chosen path because:

in my opinion, too much published research is cautious incrementalism that adds little value. Research that makes a significant impact establishes new directions and generates fresh insights because it opens new vistas and challenges convention; but, given the highly conservative nature of the reviewing system, it is more difficult to publish. Boldness, in nearly all aspects of life, requires persistence.

Today, Watson recalls that, when Bernard arrived at the University of Georgia, it was quickly clear that he was highly intelligent and motivated; but, above all, Bernard was someone you immediately liked and admired. He notes, 'Not surprisingly, as a reflective and conscientious student, Bernard considered my advice, and I know that boldness and perseverance have been valuable allies in his career'.

Reflection 13: *Have you experienced a similar problem of attempting innovative and potentially vital work that no leading journal seems to want to publish? If so, how have you dealt with it? What impact has it had on your research agenda? And what advice would you give anyone thinking of working on unorthodox questions at an earlier stage in their career?*

After successfully completing his Ph.D., Bernard was selected by his department for a one-year post-doctoral position at Stanford Business School in 1996. He remembers the stint as being very challenging. He had to work very hard, for instance, to produce teaching cases out of research results pertaining to the IT industry. His goal was to learn as much from the experience as possible. He was also able to work on several journal articles during the time. While he was engaged in research work at the business school, he also managed to approach the Stanford Engineering School to secure a teaching collaboration with his department at NUS. It was, by all accounts, a productive year.

Reflection 14: *Were you ever on a post-doctoral fellowship? What was that experience like? What was expected of you? What were you able to achieve? What impact did it have on your career?*

2. EARLY YEARS AT THE NUS SCHOOL OF COMPUTING

In 1997, Bernard was hired as an Assistant Professor at DISCS. A year later, DISCS became the NUS School of Computing. With its upgraded status, the school enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy to define its own culture. This

also meant having to build up its funding and put in place new structures such as a mentorship scheme. Faculty in the newly established departments within the school found that they needed to be more forthcoming in ‘volunteering’ service. Teaching loads, too, were heavy.

Reflection 15: *Would you describe your department as ‘collegial’? Is there a culture of volunteering to serve beyond minimal expectations? Does your department have a formula for calculating workloads as a way of equalizing the distribution of teaching and service responsibilities among colleagues? What are the pros and cons of adopting systems of workload calculation to ensure ‘equality’?*

Bernard often agreed to teach modules that his colleagues were generally reluctant to teach, such as the first-year modules that typically had large enrolments. Some of these modules were not even ‘Computing’ modules. In those days, students in one faculty did not read modules offered by other faculties even if those modules were obviously relevant to their studies. Instead, each faculty or school would typically mount its own complete set of modules, even if some of these were outside its immediate areas of expertise. His department Head explained that it was extremely important to teach these first-year modules well in order for the department to be able to attract Computing students who studied a common curriculum in their first year. He hoped that these students would go on to choose the subject majors offered by his department as they progressed into their subsequent years of study. The first modules that Bernard taught were on financial accounting, and managerial and cost accounting. He agreed to teach these courses because he wanted to play a part in his department’s efforts to attract students.

Reflection 16: *What was the first course that you were assigned to teach? What are the challenges of teaching first-year courses? Is it a good idea for new faculty to be assigned to teach first-year courses? What are the challenges of teaching upper-level courses? Is it a good idea for new faculty to be assigned to teach upper-level courses?*

The casualty rate was high then because some faculty members were not accustomed to the changing culture in NUS that emphasized research. Younger faculty had to hone their survival skills. Fortunately, they were sufficiently collegial to be mutually supportive of one another.

Reflection 17: *Are you part of a formal or informal peer support group? Is it important to have one?*

Thankfully, in Bernard's case, Raman had taught him to persevere and Watson had taught him to be bold. Bernard's initial success – and his generally relaxed character – gave him confidence. He realized that making mistakes was not a problem, but repeating mistakes was. And so he made an active effort to learn from his own and other people's mistakes.

Reflection 18: *Do you have an example to share of learning from your own or other people's mistakes?*

On reflection, Bernard feels that he was, at the time, being groomed by the Information Systems Department for leadership positions. Possibly, this was because he had been willing to work hard and to do the work that others were less willing to do. He was, in all of this, also able to continue publishing his research and attaining good teaching scores. In early 2000, Bernard was promoted to Associate Professor, gaining tenure in late 2000. A major promotion in three years was remarkable. At that time, according to the old system at NUS, faculty were promoted only after about seven years of service. Subsequently, he took on various leadership positions such as Assistant Dean (2000 to 2002), Department Head (2002 to 2008), and – since 2009 – Associate Provost.

Bernard realized that having the right attitude can actually propel an academic to succeed ahead of those who rely only on their academic talent, impressive though their talent may be. Today, Bernard recruits graduate students to work with him mainly on the basis of their having the right attitude.

Reflection 19: *Do you agree that, in academic careers, attitude is more important than aptitude and ability?*

He makes it a point to find out what they want to achieve and then guides and grooms them accordingly. Bernard believes that everyone is disadvantaged in some way or other. But being aware of one's particular disadvantages presents an opportunity to improve. It is important, he thinks, to lay strong foundations, even when one is on the move. Careers, he says, are more like marathons than short races.

3. THE ROLE OF A PROFESSOR

Still steadily running the professorial marathon, Bernard's curriculum vitae already contains much evidence of success in all three areas that constitute his almost accidentally chosen profession.

Reflection 20: *What do you think should be included in and excluded from a list of indicators showing success in research, teaching, and service?*

In 2002, Bernard won the prestigious NUS Young Researcher Award. Over the years, he has published numerous articles in leading international journals and conference proceedings. He now sits on the editorial boards of a number of journals. He has also served as Distinguished Honorary Professor at Fudan University in China and Guest Professor of Renmin University, also in China.

In 2004, Bernard won the prestigious NUS Outstanding Educator Award. Since 2009, he has been a Fellow of the NUS Teaching Academy.

Reflection 21: *Are you aware of the Teaching Academy at NUS and its various activities? What would you like the Teaching Academy to do for you?*

To improve his own teaching, Bernard made it a point to learn from his colleagues who had done well in teaching by observing them in action. For instance, he saw how a colleague used recent industry examples to illustrate concepts and ideas in class. To illustrate a change in software development paradigm, the colleague discussed new software engineering approaches that involved assembling components rather than building systems from scratch. Bernard also saw how another colleague used recent newspaper articles to reinforce salient points that were made in class. The colleague emphasized the importance of IT security, for example, by drawing attention to newspapers articles about the prevalence of IT fraud due to a lack of IT security. Bernard also noted the innovative ways developed by his colleagues to encourage class participation in higher-level modules. In one class, for example, students were organized into groups that debated with each other on issues that could be understood from multiple perspectives. In this way, the complexity of such issues could be foregrounded. Bernard has incorporated several of these ideas into his own teaching practice.

Reflection 22: *Have you observed your colleagues in the classroom? Have you been observed? If you think it is valuable, what can be done to ensure that, outside or through formal teaching assessment mechanisms, peer observation is productively conducted and more widely practised at NUS?*

In the earlier years, he used to build his confidence by practising in front of the mirror.

Reflection 23: *Can you share any personal 'tricks' that you do to build your confidence for teaching?*

Bernard's teaching is characterized by the use of real-life cases to provide background information for student assignments.

Reflection 24: *Case study methods of teaching are very often used in Business and Public Policy schools. And there are many ways of using cases, including role-play activities. Have you used them in your own teaching? How can they be most productively used? The NUS Teaching Academy's Academic Journeys series of case studies, of which this is the second, is aimed at stimulating individual reflection and group discussion. From the list of reflection questions, facilitators can select those questions that are relevant to the topic of interest and generate discussion and other activities from them. What other ways can case studies like these be used?*

He credits many of his teaching ideas to the innovative and forward-looking methods he observed while at Stanford University. He notes that more funding should be allocated in NUS towards supporting educational experimentation.

Reflection 25: *Do you agree that there is inadequate support for pedagogical experimentation at NUS? If you think it is important, how can experimentation be encouraged? What are some of the problems with experimentation that educators need to be aware of?*

In 2009, Bernard was appointed an Associate Provost at the university, overseeing undergraduate education. Over the years, he has also sat on a number of high-level university committees. Three years after NUS hired him as a faculty member, he became Assistant Dean of the School of Computing for two years, and subsequently head of the Department of Information Systems for six. Outside of NUS, Bernard has served on the boards or committees of a number of professional associations and educational institutions. He has also served on a number of important national-level committees. Looking back, Bernard wonders if he might have taken on too many appointments at an early stage in his career. He was encouraged to take up these appointments not for any prestige, but because he was viewed as someone who enjoyed working with people. Through such leadership positions, he could also help to improve the profile of his department and raise necessary funds for student prizes and bursaries. Everything has worked out well so far in his career marathon. But if he had to do it all again, he might just wait a few years before saying yes to some of these service responsibilities. In particular, he might not have agreed to be an Assistant Dean and to chair his department's Search Committee at the point in

his career when he was a newly promoted but still untenured Associate Professor. At that time, the promotion and tenure process at NUS was not as rigorous as it is today and so there was always a strong sense of uncertainty about the outcomes. Thankfully, Bernard gained tenure six months after taking up these roles.

Reflection 26: *Do you think younger faculty should be given such heavy responsibilities and leadership positions at the early stages of their careers?*

4. INTERDISCIPLINARY AND COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

Bernard describes his own work as interdisciplinary. At the beginning of his research career, he realized that he needed to understand not only information systems, but also psychology and social psychology in particular. At times, the sheer volume of knowledge that he had to learn from other disciplines overwhelmed him, but, with practice, he eventually developed the skill of being able quickly to distinguish what was valuable and useful to him and what was not.

Reflection 27: *Have you found the need to go outside of your discipline in order to answer some research questions in a more satisfactory way? If so, what difficulties have you encountered in doing this? Were there also other unexpected benefits that came with this?*

In the old days, he recalls, NUS did not regard interdisciplinary research as valuable. Department heads would typically discourage their faculty from exploring outside of their own discipline. There was always a risk in younger faculty pursuing research that may not yield results or that yields results that are not readily appreciated by others working in established fields. Later, there was also some difficulty in identifying referees and reviewers who would be sympathetic to the interdisciplinary work of tenure candidates. Many leading journals, steeped in their disciplinary tradition, were resistant towards accepting and publishing interdisciplinary submissions.

Reflection 28: *If you do interdisciplinary work or have wanted to do it, do these kinds of problems and obstacles sound familiar to you? How have you dealt with them?*

Today, younger colleagues can go into interdisciplinary work without much fear, since there is now greater awareness among scholars and reviewers of the value of knowledge that grows from across or in between disciplines. NUS has been careful to appoint broadminded professors to sit on its highest-

level promotion and tenure committee. Today, there are large grants available for interdisciplinary work. Even if researchers published primarily within their own disciplines, borrowing ideas from other disciplines can enrich their work. It is also no longer as difficult to get such work published. The editors of leading journals, it seems to Bernard, are now more prepared to take a chance with submissions that engage other fields and disciplines. There are more interdisciplinary journals today and more of them are being included in the upper tiers of journal classification lists compiled by NUS.

Reflection 29: *Do you share this optimistic view that the current situation is more supportive of interdisciplinary work?*

To Bernard, what should matter most is the significance of one's research. For instance, the university should value research that addresses 'significant problems' facing the world such as the global problem of food shortage. Significant problems are usually complex problems with many different aspects. Bernard sees the potential for different disciplines and fields to contribute parts of what is inevitably a complex solution. He believes that scholars should be aware of how different disciplines and their solutions can work together. Even scholars specializing in pure and abstract research should, Bernard insists, have at least a sense of the practical contribution they might be able to make.

Reflection 30: *Do you agree that researchers need always to have a sense of the practical implications of their work, and that research should be judged on how well it addresses 'significant problems'? What are some of the complications in taking this view?*

It is not difficult to see how interdisciplinary research can be greatly facilitated by collaborative approaches. At the very least, collaboration makes it possible for scholars in different disciplines to come together to do different parts of the work, then bring their skills and expertise together to produce outcomes that open up new perspectives. However, Bernard recalls how challenging it was as a relatively junior academic to find willing collaborators among the more established names in cognate fields. It was also not wise, he believes, for younger faculty to take up joint appointments in different units at NUS as a way of advancing their interdisciplinary agenda, at least not before achieving the security of tenure.

Reflection 31: *Have you held joint appointments before? If so, what was your experience of it?*

In any case, Bernard thinks that most departments or faculties at NUS today are sufficiently big and diverse that one can, without too much difficulty, find good collaborators.

Reflection 32: *Are you engaged in collaborative work? If so, what challenges did you face in forging collaborative relationships? What are the challenges of working collaboratively across disciplines?*

Bernard also recalls how challenging it was to connect with established academic figures from overseas, in particular those from the US. Bernard made it a point to attend international conferences where such people congregated. In the early years, he would approach editors of US-based journals, talk admiringly about their work, and even take photographs with them (which, in the pre-email era, he would label, sign, and send to them by airmail). Bernard realized how important it was to invest time in cultivating networks and even to work through other people's networks.

Reflection 33: *Have you conscientiously cultivated an international network? How useful are large international conferences for building professional networks? Can you share concrete examples of how your professional network has benefited you?*

Unfortunately, as Bernard quickly realized at these conferences, US academics used to have rather low regard for Asian academics. Today, he is happy to say, things appear to have changed. Asian universities are growing fast but universities in the rest of the world seem to have stagnated. Many US academics actually want to work in Asia, where universities seem to be better resourced and offer more opportunities. NUS, for example, has a reputation for being research-driven, welcoming of international expertise, and willing to invest resources into supporting international activities. These qualities helped NUS to attract academic stars, forming a critical mass that has been able, in turn, to attract a range of talented individuals no longer worried that they would be academically isolated in Singapore.

Reflection 34: *Do you think this is an accurate description of NUS's talent management approach? If so, do you think it was or is the best way to do it? If not, how should NUS attract and manage talent?*

As a Singaporean academic, Bernard also understands why many local academics might feel like 'second-class citizens'. However, he notes that the disparities between employment terms for local and expatriate academics have

gradually leveled over the years. In the spirit of long-term self-improvement, Bernard has always believed that it is important for Singaporean academics always to benchmark themselves against their international colleagues, striving to improve their relative standing.

Reflection 35: *What do you think of the so-called ‘local/expatriate’ divide at NUS? Are these disparities a problem of perception? Are you as optimistic that the disparities, real or perceived, are becoming less significant?*

5. TAKING RISKS

Doing interdisciplinary research early in his career is one example of the kind of risks that Bernard has taken. In some cases, the research paid off. For instance, one project he led on groupware usage in cross-cultural settings yielded several major publications. Some others take a much longer time to yield. For instance, a project on global virtual teams produced papers that no journal wanted to publish, as the technology then was not yet well developed. Never allowing slow yield to make him risk-averse, Bernard views such work as being ahead of its time. His approach, if he is confident of the quality of such papers, is to persevere until circumstances are more welcoming of them.

Although Bernard has taken many calculated risks in his own career, he does not advocate taking risks without properly considering one’s strengths, resources, and weaknesses. While it is important to be idealistic about attaining lofty goals, one should not completely ignore real barriers and obstacles to success, particularly personal limitations. Specifically, he cautions younger academics against jumping into things with both eyes closed. They should make an effort to understand fully their own ‘risk profile’. Today, Assistant Professors feel pressured to publish in journals listed in the top tier. The risks, of course, are higher and they may end up with no publications at all. Their departments may be happier if they could at least have some work published in journals of the second tier. What academics choose to do should also depend on their risk profile.

Reflection 36: *What is your risk profile? How has it informed the choices you have made in planning your research agenda and targeting journals for publication outcomes?*

Bernard’s fun-loving and relaxed personality, fairly obvious in his own description of his formative years at school, may be one reason why he is more of a risk-taker today. He is happy to take untrodden paths out of a sense of fun and adventure, and is less likely to be hung up about failure. In NUS, he sees several others who are also risk-takers and feels that NUS should encourage

risk-taking among those who are prepared for it. He recalls how many of the professors he encountered at Stanford University differed from many of his NUS colleagues in the way they focused on what they could do instead of what they could not.

Reflection 37: *Do you agree with this characterization of academics at NUS?*

In general, of course, there is no such thing as a perfect academic environment. One should always capitalize on the opportunities offered by the system and work creatively within the constraints imposed by it. But faculty should at least be able to trust that the NUS system will not penalize them for trying new or different things. Faculty should be encouraged to manage failure, which is really a learning opportunity that should not be wasted. In such a culture, optimism and risk-taking can be promoted.

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