Valedictorians speak to KRITI SINGH about their university life, ambitions and expectations of the ‘real world’

LAST week, we took a look at former valedictorians from the three universities in Singapore and how their lives have changed since they stepped out into the ‘real world’. This week, in the second part of our graduation special, we talk to four valedictorians from the Singapore Management University (SMU), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and National University of Singapore (NUS) graduating batches of 2006.

We talked to these over-achievers about their lives at university, the lessons they’ve learnt (inside and outside the classroom), the experiences that made them grow, their ambitions and their expectations of the real world—a word so overused now that it hardly evokes the significance it holds.

DARREN LIM
Singapore Management University
Bachelor of Accountancy with Law as second major (Summa cum Laude)

WHEN Mr Lim joined SMU, he was on a mission: he hadn’t done as well as he had expected in his A-levels and he was out to prove a point.

“I had a feeling I had something to prove to myself,” he said, and four years after making that promise one would think he had succeeded.

The 24-year-old graduated from SMU this year with a perfect score 4.0 grade point average and a position as Analyst at HSBC Global Investment Banking.

When asked why he chose to study accountancy — probably considered the dullest subject — he responded by saying, “I felt that an accountancy degree would help me in my future career as it is a very flexible degree. All businesses require someone with financial know-how.”

Having been part of the third batch of students at SMU, one would assume that Mr Lim would have been slightly sceptical about the choice he made, but he said without prompt-
choice he made, but he said without prompting: “I was attracted to SMU by its multifaceted interactive seminar-style system. Having completed my education there, I feel that SMU has not, and exceeded, my initial expectations.”

Quick to dispel myths about videolabians being bookish, he talked about his curricular and co-curricular activities. A keen reader, he is interested in bioethics and global public relations. His list of university-level extra-curricular activities could give even the most socially active student a serious inferiority complex. He was part of the university’s Interstate Public Relations for the Toastmasters Club, a member of the Students’ Association Council, and interim vice president and first elected president of SMU’s Accounting Society.

One would think that with such an impressive record it would be hard not to feel a little smug, but Mr Lim showed an immense amount of humility by talking about the support given to him by his parents. When asked about the most important experiences from his university education, he responded by saying: “What I learnt was that our common sense may not be reflected in the way the real world works. My research in the humanities was on giant clam research. Who would have thought that these unusual animals have the ability to walk? I certainly was deeply surprised, and that formed the main course of my research.”

His main reason of joining NUS was that he felt that it was very strong in marine and biodiversity research. Being on the National University of Singapore’s Research Scholars Programme, meanwhile, provided him with a broad-based, multidisciplinary education.

“This world does not function as discrete disciplines allow it to. It is necessary to have a holistic view of our environment by drawing innovative connections between subjects and ideas,” he said by way of explanation.

Marine biology definitely seems to be his calling. Mr Huang also enjoys scuba diving, but this 24-year-old also has a strong sense of what others in the world are going through and the opportunities that have come his way.

“I always feel that it is a privilege to be able to receive tertiary education. Many in this world have limited educational opportunities, let alone university education,” he said. “I hold on to the ideal that everyone who is given the chance to study works hard to push the boundaries of knowledge, innovation and technology, this world may become more habitable and education, even higher education, can become a reality for all.”

It seems to be his goal to help others in the same position by promoting his research and work. He also aspires to be a source of inspiration to young people.

He took part in and led overseas community projects and humanitarian relief efforts in Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. He also participated in the inaugural National Bioentrepreneur Forum 2004, and is in the organizing committee of the second instalments of the forum this year. He is also a volunteer for the Heart to Hope cancer aid of the Children’s Cancer Foundation, and recently had an essay published by his school to help raise donations.

He also volunteered in the marine biodiversity and conservation scene, being part of the Teddyfail (the volunteer arm of the Rainbow Fish Museum of Biodiversity Research) and Blue Water Volunteers (a marine conservation effort organisation), serving as a nature guide for public walks on coral reefs at Southern islands of Singapore and participating in coral reef surveys and studies in Singapore.

Talking about one experience at a Youth Expedition Programme in Vietnam, he said that one of the most important lessons he learned was that the same environment that surrounds us is seen very differently among different people, and many factors could have led to this, including differences in the people’s socio-economic status, one’s experiences and background.

“It was interesting to observe that, although it was the same environment and the same ground that we were witnessing, the needs that the local officials perceived are sometimes very different from the way we see it, and within the team, we had difficulties in how the situation warrants our help as well,” he said.

“Many of us hope to continue working in the marine research field and contribute to the various organisations he is committed to. His research topics are quite varied – be it marine biology or engineering – and he is part of a “Take the lead; be the change” movement."