

COVID-19

Uncertain times for new

Once-in-a-lifetime trips and dream job interviews are some of the plans on hold now due to the ongoing global health pandemic. ANG YIYING finds out how the education journey for some has ended abruptly.

There will be no moment in the spotlight, on stage posing with a certificate in front of family and friends, or the mass applause of their peers. For students graduating this year from polytechnics and the Institutes of Technical Education (ITE), graduation ceremonies have been cancelled.

Unlike their seniors, some 26,000 polytechnic students and 6,500 students from ITEs will graduate next month and in July without the usual fanfare.

And though local universities hold their ceremonies later in the year, undergraduates may face a similar quiet end to their academic journeys.

At least one university, the Singapore Management University (SMU), has made alternative arrangements to conduct a virtual ceremony, it announced in a circular to students on April 5. Others, such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), say they are still monitoring the situation.

Graduating in a year marked by a global pandemic has also disrupted the plans of the 2020 graduating cohort in other ways.

What would have been a year of promise and dreams has turned into disappointment as many have had to cancel plans for once-in-a-lifetime graduation trips with friends and also grapple with the uncertainty about finding employment in a challenging job market.

These were the common themes that emerged from IN's interviews with more than 30 students graduating from ITEs, polytechnics, universities and other higher institutions.

Said Ms Jae-Eryana Fitri, 21, who is graduating this year from Republic Polytechnic with a diploma in mass communication: "It was supposed to be the year of final laughs, final memories and having an official closure of the three years spent in polytechnic.

"Some of us might never go back to studying, so this is the final chapter of our school lives and to know that we won't be able to celebrate among ourselves or even have a proper ceremony really leaves a bitter taste in my mouth."

FROM GOING EVERYWHERE TO NOWHERE

Many students said they had plans to travel

with friends in the period after sitting final exams, handing in final-year projects or attending their official graduation ceremonies, but such plans were abandoned as countries started imposing lockdown measures.

Mr Abu Ahsfer, 26, who is graduating from SMU with a double major in accounting and finance, had planned a month-long trip with friends to the United States and South America that would have taken place next month.

"We were about to book our tickets – that was in February – and the Covid (situation) became quite bad and we held back. And then it became worse and we didn't go ahead," he said.

Another student, Mr Odell Jeremiah Dass, 21, had planned to visit Bangkok last month, Japan and Boracay in the Philippines this month, and London and Scotland next month.

The Republic Polytechnic student, who is graduating with a diploma in mass communication, had details of the trips mapped out: from feasting on Thai food, to sunning himself on the beaches of Boracay, shopping for film cameras in Tokyo and museum-hopping in London. He and his friends also wanted to use the trips to create content for their portfolios.

Instead, he found himself "waiting four hours on Expedia's hotline with probably every other Singaporean out there cancelling flights and getting refunds for dream trips".

ENTERING A COLD JOB MARKET

Even more worrying for the graduating cohort: jobs, or the possible lack thereof.

Graduating students spoke of the uncertainty they face, with news of companies reducing operations and having difficulties in holding on to staff.

Ms Lucia Yee, 24, a psychology major at SIM Global Education, is pragmatic about not finding an ideal job related to her de-



graduates



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They are also advised to consider higher education, upskilling or traineeships during potential economy downturns for stronger employability.”

Mr Jerry Soo, vice-president (academic) of Nafa, said that although the school is offering support for graduating students, they should explore all available opportunities

gree: “Many industries may not be hiring anymore. If after a while I can’t get any job, I may just take anything that comes along.”

For some, their fields of study may have been hit particularly hard by Covid-19 and the precautionary measures to stall its spread.

Mr Gabriel Ching, 23, who is completing a degree programme in arts management, which is validated by the University of Essex, at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa), is fully aware of the challenges facing the arts industry.

“It’s really heartrending to see the situation of

the industry, from a full calendar of cultural events to essentially all performing arts shows for live audiences cancelled,” he said.

So far, cancelled events in the arts sector have cost theatre companies, orchestras and more some \$2.6 million.

His schoolmate, Ms Priscilla Wee, 23, said that if she could not find a full-time job, she was willing to work as an intern. “If I have no choice, I would then do it. In order to gain more experience, you have to start somewhere.”

Even those who have secured job offers feel an element of uncertainty.

Mr Lim Kuan Wei, 25, an accounting student who is graduating from SMU, said he, along with many of his friends who studied finance and accountancy, received job offers at the end of last year or beginning of this year before the economy took a dive.

He said: “But the thing is, we’ve been hearing rumours that certain companies may rescind offers due to hiring freezes.”

WHAT SCHOOLS ARE DOING

Schools said they recognised the challenging market conditions their graduating students faced.

Some of the steps they are taking to support students finding jobs include converting traditional career fairs, where employers meet graduating students, into digital career fairs, and putting more emphasis on brushing up students’ online interviewing skills as many interviews are being done virtually during this period.

Lasalle College of the Arts said that it was producing a set of videos focusing on skills, such as interview skills, that its students can access via its career services Web portal.

Temasek Polytechnic said it was, among other

things, tapping its network of industry partners to provide job matching and career opportunities “within and beyond the sectors the graduates have been trained for”.

Since 2011, SMU graduates have received career support, such as access to its job portal and career coaches, for up to a year after graduation. New this year is a matching service where those who have yet to secure full-time jobs would be matched with employers still looking for graduates to fill positions.

Schools such as NUS and NTU also said they were looking to launch more initiatives for graduating students.

Mr Jerry Soo, vice-president (academic) of Nafa, said that on top of other support for graduating students: “Additionally, we encourage graduating students to approach their respective internship companies to seek job opportunities.

“They are also advised to consider higher education, upskilling or traineeships during potential economy downturns for stronger employability.”

Flexibility is the key, it seems.

Said Ms Michelle Owyong, 23, who majors in real estate and is graduating from NUS: “I guess if I were given a choice, I would prefer not to graduate this year, considering the situation now.”

She added: “Before the Covid-19 situation, I felt like there were more jobs and opportunities to find what I wanted to do. Right now, with hiring freezes and the economy, I am trying to keep my options open.”

Additional reporting by Saraswathy Kumaran and students from Republic Polytechnic’s School of Management and Communication: Mickayla Lew Tze Ee, Lor Wen Shuan Kelly, Aloysius Ang Jun Fung and Siti Nurfarhana Mazlan

