Teaching Connections Podcast

Episode	13

Title:	A Conversation with NUS Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost Professor Aaron Thean

NUS Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost Professor Aaron Thean shares his thoughts on how faculty colleagues and students have responded to the shift to interdisciplinary learning in NUS and the corresponding changes to the learning environment.

This episode is chaired by Assoc Prof Soo Yuen Jien, Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

0   **Intro Music & Voiceover**

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1   **Welcome/ Intro (00:25)**:

Soo Yuen Jien (SYJ): "Hello, everyone. I'm Yuen Jien, Director of CDTL, and welcome everyone back on campus for a new academic year. In this episode, we are pleased to have NUS Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost, Professor Aaron Thean with us to share more about his perspective on interdisciplinary teaching and learning in NUS.

Hello, Aaron, and thank you very much for joining us today."

Provost Aaron Thean (PVO-AT): "Most welcome! Thanks for having me, and looking forward to a good chat on this topic."

2 Question #1

SYJ: "So in the recent issue of the *Alumnus* magazine, you say and I quote:

> 'The shift to interdisciplinary learning requires crossing traditional academic boundaries, and has radically transformed the way NUS shapes its curricula.'

So in your opinion, what are the indications within the NUS teaching or learning environment that this shift is actually taking place, in a sense successfully?"

(01:24)

PVO-AT: "I see. I think, realistically speaking, we embarked on this change some time in late 2021, in a very concerted way. So strictly speaking, you know, we should see the first batch of students—who experienced this type of new learning curriculum— some time in 2025 when they graduate. And then it takes a little bit more time beyond that, as they progress to their employment, to see a response right, in reality.

[However], in the meantime, we are already seeing changes. We're actually seeing changes in the learning environment that the students are experiencing. To give an example is, obviously we've set up two colleges: the College of Humanities and Sciences (CHS), and a College of Design and Engineering (CDE). And we are seeing a lot of cooperation between the staff in providing new learning modules that are intrinsically multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary. And we're seeing the students taking to it pretty well. We're seeing specifically in some of these Colleges, students who are otherwise, you know, not sitting in the same classroom [and] not learning about the same common thing, coming together. I think, in that sense, the positive response of the students, and the hope that they are gaining something out of this, is an early sign of success, right? I mean, that they are basically responding positively to the [interdisciplinary] programme itself.

And of course, we have also sought opinions from industry and downstream about, you know, their views on this kind of programme, down to you know, what are the content to be offered, and they're all very positive. They believe that these [content] are the right stuff that the students should be learning as they go forward."

Question #2

SYJ: "So speaking of implementation, I guess there must be some key challenges for implementing this interdisciplinary learning at NUS. So maybe you can share a few [challenges] and share how do you see[*sic*] we can overcome this challenges?"

(03:51)

PVO-AT: "I think there are two things that are important. The way I see the problem is always [that] there are two portions: one is skillset, and one is mindset. These two things are very different. Sometimes you have to change your mindset to gain the right skillset. This applies not only to our students, but [also] to our staff.

So to frame it to the question you asked, what are the challenges we face? I think in early stages, obviously the staff [were] put outside their comfort zone, or being able to teach something that spans across disciplines. So not all our colleagues are obviously trained across boundaries and they shouldn't be, because all of our professors, teachers and lecturers, they may have areas of expertise [in] which they are most comfortable in. And now they're asked to say, can you create content that spans, and that would connect [across disciplines]? And not only that, you know, to expect them to work with colleagues who are of different backgrounds. I think that is one of the early challenges. [However] I think, you know, academics are typically very, very adaptive, so they have overcome that.

So now comes to the students, same thing happens, right? So the same thing happens is that the mindset of students have to be different. They have to be open to the fact [that] they are going to be learning something they may initially perceive as, 'How is this relevant to what expertise I'm trying to gain?' I think that mindset is also slowly changing, as we explain to them and as they experience [for] themselves, that actually when they are exposed to different disciplines, it opens their mind, and this is the mindset gain that they are having.

So I think the initial challenges is always with the mindset. And hopefully through that, they will gain the necessary skillset."

SYJ: "In a sense, I find that very motivating, in a sense that the staff themselves are actually modelling interdisciplinary learning, and showing the students that

they're also willing to step outside [their comfort zones]. And the students probably would be inspired, or at least motivated by that."

(**06:03**)
PVO-AT: "Exactly! You know, the world is getting more challenging, and the reason why is because it's even more dynamic, [and it's] being more dynamic quicker. So being comfortable with being uncomfortable would likely be a required skill.

Question #3

SYJ: "So as a follow up, what in your opinion are some of the practical ways for the educator in NUS to prepare students for this evolving environment that you speak about? [Especially as] basically, the technologies and disciplines are rapidly converging?

(06:38)
PVO-AT: "So the two things I expect you know, a lot of our colleagues who are contributing [to] education [at NUS], the key thing is being innovative, and being relevant.

Now I don't expect our colleagues to be, you know, actively working on the topic, and then bringing that expertise in, because of the many roles that we play and being an educator, you are in school. [However, in this case of] being relevant, meaning that [you have an] understanding [of] the relevance of the stuff. So as things happen quickly, [so] it's important for our colleagues to keep abreast of what is actually happening, to have collaborations that can bring in knowledge from the outside to the inside, right? So I think, not to be locked up in an ivory tower, but rather to go touch base with the expert experts in the field,

I think the other way [to consider this] is, how do I [as an educator] translate that [knowledge] into an innovative content that can be easily absorbed by our students, adapted to the way our students learn, and adapted to use technology to help deliver those content? So I think these are the challenges of our educators in [this] modern time, which is to be able to [adapt], you know, [and deliver] the content in an engaging way to our students so that they can absorb it, and [also] figure out what content is relevant [that needs] to be delivered. I think these are the things I expect them to do."

SYJ: "So in a way, as I understand it, the educator needs to also be a 'translator', [in order] to translate the 'imaginary' world to the 'real' world and vice versa."

(08:26)
PVO-AT: "[Also], being an educator in a place like NUS is, you're in one of the best places to be, right? Because we are a comprehensive university, we have active engagement with industry, we have a huge student body, and I think everything converges here. So it's actually a very exciting time for our educators."

Question #4

SYJ: "We have come to the end of the podcast! As the new academic year is upon us, what are two essential pieces of advice or encouragement that you would like to give to all our staff and students?"

(09:06)
PVO-AT: "Yeah, so it comes back to the two points I made about mindset and skillset for both our staff and our students: Keep an open mind, and keep looking out for innovation, and don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone to learn.

For our staff, learn so that they can teach, and for our students, to keep an open mind so that you know, trust us with what we [educators] are going to be offering you, be open-minded to [gaining] experience here. Hopefully everybody gains the right skillset: the educators gain the skillset to teach and deliver the content, and the students basically gain the right skillset so they become successful in the workplace.

Yeah, so it's an interesting thing because, you know, sometimes you need the students to make the good educator, [likewise] you need a good educator to make better students, right? So I think this is a work in progress, that we continually collaborate between the two bodies."

Closing Remarks

SYJ: "In a sense, it is like a positive feedback cycle.

So, thank you very much, Aaron, for sharing your insights and perspectives on teaching and learning with."

PVO-AT: "I'm very happy to do so. Thanks for having me. Thank you."

Outro Voiceover

"Thank you for tuning in to the CDTL podcast."