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Taking four gap years allowed Ms Jody Ang to do range of jobs and even start a business

Ang Yiyang

By day, Ms Jody Ang, 27, pursues a double degree in business management and social science at Singapore Management University (SMU) and is part of the university's Lee Kong Chian Scholars Programme.

But when she is not in class, she is running two businesses that she started, both set up at different points when she took time off from the conventional academic route.

Ms Ang took four gap years between sitting her A levels at St Andrew's Junior College in 2008 and enrolling in SMU in 2013, doing a range of jobs.

Among them, she worked as a motivational speaker for a vendor which went to schools to give talks on topics such as time management, tutored junior college and secondary school students in mathematics and science; earned her diving licence and worked as a divemaster, someone who assists diving instructors in teaching new divers and who can lead leisure diving groups. She even mixed drinks as a bartender at a restaurant.

Pathways like Ms Ang's - with the taking of gap years or time off

school - have become more acceptable in recent years.

In fact, National University of Singapore (NUS) provost Tan Eng Chye, who will become its president next year, said in a July interview that NUS is looking at allowing flexibility for students to take a gap year, or even two, during their four years of study.

Over at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, full-time students can defer their studies at any time, with up to six years to complete their programmes.

The other five local universities say undergraduates interested in taking time off during their studies can do so by taking a leave of absence, though these are usually evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

A gap year refers to a period of time, usually an academic year, taken between junior college or high school and pursuing tertiary studies at a university or during university itself.

Many young people use the time to pursue practical or professional knowledge, such as to figure out what jobs they enjoy, or sometimes to travel.

But for Ms Ang, she went a step further, first setting up bakery Grin Affair, which served its desserts in



Above: Ms Jody Ang set up bakery Grin Affair and worked as a divemaster (left) during her gap years between JC and university. She also took a leave of absence from SMU last year to set up a healthy snacks business. PHOTOS: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES, COURTESY OF JODY ANG

jars, when she was 21 years old in 2011, in the third of her four gap years.

Her first business venture is still ongoing and has a second outlet now, although she has left the day-to-day operations to the second of her two older brothers.

Last year, during a semester's leave of absence from SMU, she started her second business, which supplies healthy snacks to other businesses under the brand Folks and Stories.

For Ms Ang, who scored straight As for her A levels, her choice was

sparked by feeling "unprepared" and unsure of what she wanted to study in university.

She said: "If I try to look back and try to explain why right after JC, I suddenly decided that I wanted to spend some time doing my own thing, it's because I never felt like I was old enough to decide for myself. Finally, I could work and earn some money."

While doing other jobs, she pursued her interests, such as baking. Chancing upon an affordable space in Everton Park, an estate off Neil Road where her grandmother lived, made her consider setting up a business.

With savings from her work stints, she set up shop with less than \$30,000. In the beginning, she often put in 12-hour days.

While she did not have the money or know-how to market the business, she scored a lucky break when a blogger wrote about her bakery, which attracted more people to visit it. Business picked up and the mainstream media subsequently reported about the shop as well.

Her business also partly sparked her decision to apply to SMU. She said: "I did a lot of things by intuition. I thought, I should get some concrete knowledge."

While on an exchange programme in Poland in 2015, a discussion with her boyfriend led to an idea for a healthy treats business. When they came back, they started the business together.

To work on it, she took a leave of absence for a semester in the first half of last year.

When she returned to school, she chose to spread out her remaining modules so she could spend time on her healthy snacks business, extending her graduating date. She will graduate in April next year.

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