

A heart for giving back

Ms Esther Chong plans to use her interdisciplinary skills to impact society for good

JOSHUA WONG

SPENDING over 14 hours a week volunteering while pursuing a full-time undergraduate degree is no easy feat.

Yet this is exactly what Ms Esther Chong, a recipient of the Singapore Management University (SMU) Global Impact Scholarship, does.

She volunteers at non-profit organisation Conjoint Consulting, which offers pro bono management consulting services to social enterprises and other non-profit organisations.

And she does this while pursuing a double degree — in Accountancy, and Politics, Law and Economics (PLE), which was introduced in 2016.

"I wanted a learning experience that would give me an understanding of the world we live in," she says. "The unique combination of politics, law and economics is a holistic educational experience that will prepare me for any job I undertake."

Studying accountancy on top of these subjects gives Ms Chong a grasp of the business world too, further equipping her with a multi-disciplinary skill set.

Her bond-free scholarship covers tuition fees and an annual living allowance, and finances international opportunities (such as exchange programmes or Overseas Community Service Projects). It also provides her with a one-time computer allowance.

Additionally, the scholarship



Ms Chong spends much of her free time volunteering to help others. PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

funds an optional master's degree in SMU that the recipient can choose to begin within five years of graduation.

Says Ms Chong: "While my scholarship is bond-free, I believe that recipients have a tacit obligation to bring value to both our local and global community. I see SMU's fund-

ing of this scholarship as an anticipation that recipients will be future change-makers — something that I hope to be."

Dedicated professors

Some modules Ms Chong has taken so far include Introduction to Political and Policy Studies, Introductory Statistics, and

Research Methods in Sociology and Political Science.

She is enjoying her studies thus far, not least because of her professors' dedication to helping their students.

For instance, one of her professors stayed back after classes to explain a statistical concept that was not in the syllabus but

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20-odd groups to help them with their presentations, and provided additional guidance for any student who struggled to understand class concepts.

"The number of hours he put in to nurture his students, and the sincerity with which he received and applied the feedback we gave him really moved me," she says.

Caring for the community
Just as her professors put their heart into teaching, so does Ms Chong into helping others by applying what she has learnt in school.

Over her semester break last December, Ms Chong assisted a professor in conducting research on food insecurity and poverty in Singapore. She and a coursemate interviewed residents of a rental flat in Tampines as part of the project.

"It was disheartening to hear the stories of how these people struggle to put food on the table for their families. It opened my eyes to the privileges I enjoy, and strengthened my desire to ease the burden of the less fortunate in society," she says.

Ms Chong will graduate in 2021, and plans to work before pursuing a Master of Tri-Sector Collaboration, which focuses on the intersection between government, businesses and civil society, with sponsorship from SMU.

For now, she is looking forward to working in social research — like her professor who researched food insecurity in Singapore — or social auditing, which involves assessing the impact of a company on society and suggesting ways for them to improve their corporate social responsibility.

She says: "It would be the ultimate blessing if I can create real value for whichever community I will be based in."