

A GUIDING HAND

Ms Lee with her mentor,
Samsung's Mr Koh.

PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

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Mr Koh



Alumni giving back – not money, but time

Mentorship programmes are growing as alumni guide undergrads on careers

By Cai Yong

caiyong@sph.com.sg

IT USED to be that university alumni would write cheques to their alma mater as their contribution to the institution. These days though, they are keen to present a more precious gift – their time.

In the past decade, the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU) have independently rolled out mentorship programmes under which high-flying alumni return to take juniors under their wing. The idea is to help undergraduates as they prepare for their first career, a turbulent time for many.

Pearl Lee, a fourth-year business student at NUS, recalls her own time of uncertainty: "Back then in Year 1, the more I studied, the more I became unsure of what I wanted in life."

She thus leapt at the opportunity to get help in her second year when she found out about the NUS-Residential Colleges Mentorship Programme set up by the NUS Society (NUSS), the largest of the university's alumni clubs.

Having expressed interest in marketing, she and one other mentee were paired with Barry Koh, the regional director of trade and retail marketing at Samsung for South-east Asia and Oceania.

The three of them met regularly. During these sessions, Mr Koh shared his life experiences and offered career and life advice to them.

The programme was to have lasted a year but by the end of it, the trio had decided to continue keeping in touch. Mr Koh's two mentees in fact went on to bring in a friend each. He says: "Now, I have a big family."

When the NUS-Residential Colleges Mentorship Programme started in 2012, it had 15 mentors; within two years, the number grew to 69. There are other such mentorship programmes running on the campus; to date, more than 800 alumni mentors have volunteered their services.

The picture is similar at NTU. Professor Kam Chan Hin, the senior associate provost of undergraduate education, says NTU's alumni mentorship programme, Mentorlink, started in 2004 with just a few volunteer mentors; the number stands at more than 800 today.

Under Mentorlink, mentors and mentees are required to make contact either in person or by phone at least once, but are free to arrange subsequent sessions as they see fit.

SMU takes a similar approach, but recommends at least two contact sessions. Sharon Tan, its director at the office of advancement and alumni, says: "We shouldn't (interfere too much) because these are volunteer platforms. We do have parameters drawn up . . . but thereafter, it's really up to them because some people click better than others."

SMU conducts two three-month mentorship programmes each year; this year, 350 mentors came forward.

Mentorship programmes are a fairly recent thing. NUSS and SMU's programmes began in the last five

years. NTU's Prof Kam confirms that lately, more graduates – recent ones – have stepped up to offer their time.

SMU's Ms Tan says she believes the newer generations of alumni have a stronger attachment to their alma maters. Among the alumni of SMU, the newest school, are pioneers of the university's many societies and who helped shape policies. They thus have an especially strong sense of ownership, she says.

R Sinnakaruppan, president of the NTU Alumni Club, says of the desire to mentor juniors: "Because we are the graduates of the university and we are in different stages of our careers, it's quite natural that you want to help the younger brother or sister."

Although the NTU alumni club is not directly involved in Mentorlink, he sees greater collaboration between the two as a possibility, and has broached the idea of a programme for fresh graduates that will help them navigate their way through the working world. The plan is still in its infancy.

Mr Koh says he found his motivation to pitch in as a mentor by looking back to his past: "If this programme had existed during my time, I would have benefited from it because I would have been able to bounce ideas, talk about career options and clarify doubts."

Ms Lee, who later undertook an internship with Samsung on his referral, is certainly grateful. She says: "Barry is not just a mentor but a real friend who has coached us and provided us with great advice."