

Universities move freshmen orientation online amid Covid-19

Jolene Ang

University orientation season is here. Unlike in previous years, though, there are no loud, boisterous cheers or crowds of freshmen on campus grounds.

Instead, most freshmen orientation programmes at the autonomous universities here have moved online owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. Most are not compulsory.

The Sunday Times observed one such virtual session at Singapore Management University (SMU) last Wednesday, when a group of 12 freshmen were hosted by two senior student facilitators in a teleconference call on the Webex platform.

About 1,900 incoming SMU students, out of a 2,300-strong cohort, participated in the online orientation, which featured programmes such as games and webinars.

Over 200 current student facilitators, 30 student organisers and 20 staff trainers were also involved.

During the session that The Sunday Times attended, the freshmen were keen to find out more about issues such as SMU's practice of bidding for modules.

Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung also joined the group, taking part in some games and chatting with the students. He told them: "One of the things I did before I left the Ministry of Education... is (to ensure) that when universities open, you can have 50 per cent to 60 per cent of footfall back in campus, which I think is an important thing to do.

"Because for young people, to stay at home and do online learning is just not the same.

"University is also really about friendship, meeting people, and



Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung, who until recently helmed the Ministry of Education, taking part in a virtual orientation session with new students of Singapore Management University last week. PHOTO: SMU

sometimes meeting your professors face to face, asking questions and exploring queries that you have."

One of the group's facilitators, third-year accountancy student Mikail Ismail, said he took on a similar role in last year's physical orientation programme.

It could be tougher to forge close and meaningful relations with the freshmen with an online programme, the 22-year-old said.

"But I'm hoping that once everything gets better, the school can and will provide opportunities for them to get to know one another better, to have fun."

Incoming business management student Terrence Seow, 23, said he enjoyed the webinars, adding that his two facilitators did well in helping the group gel.

"Before I came for the camp, I didn't have high hopes. But my facilitators and group mates are very engaging and I'm very lucky to be able

to make friends with them," he said.

Other universities have come up with similar virtual orientation programmes. The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) will be holding a week-long one for its 2,800 freshmen from Aug 24 to Sept 1.

It will feature virtual campus tours at each of the six SIT campuses, as well as activities such as having freshmen meeting their respective programme faculty, seniors and course mates via scheduled Zoom sessions.

The Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) held similar programmes for its incoming students last month, including live chat sessions with SUSS competition groups such as the swimming, track and field, and tennis teams.

At the National University of Singapore, freshman orientation programmes between June 1 and Aug 7, including those conducted by halls, residential colleges and residences,

have been and will continue to be conducted online.

Nanyang Technological University also said its schools, residential halls and student organisations are putting together over 40 online transition programmes for some 6,000 freshmen this month.

The Singapore University of Technology and Design, however, is the only institution still planning to have its physical orientation programme as scheduled on Sept 10 and 11.

Interim provost Lim Seh Chun said the programme is designed with the current Covid-19 situation in mind and will adhere to safe distancing measures. "Students will be divided into small groups with no cross mingling between groups... (but) if a face-to-face orientation is (still) not possible, we will endeavour to engage our new students virtually."

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FRUITFUL SESSION

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MR TERRENCE SEOW, a freshman at Singapore Management University.