

# SMU students move online as Covid-19 hits project plans

Jolene Ang

Global travel restrictions imposed at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic last year derailed plans for several overseas community service projects that were in the making for months by some students from the Singapore Management University (SMU).

One such project by a group of 15 aimed to educate people in the Iloilo province in the Philippines on health risks posed by sweetened drinks, as well as help them improve their waste management system.

Second-year information systems student Frances Severino, 22, one of the leaders of Project Kapawa II, said they decided to tweak the project to fit the context of the pandemic.

The students opted to look at online learning in the Philippines.

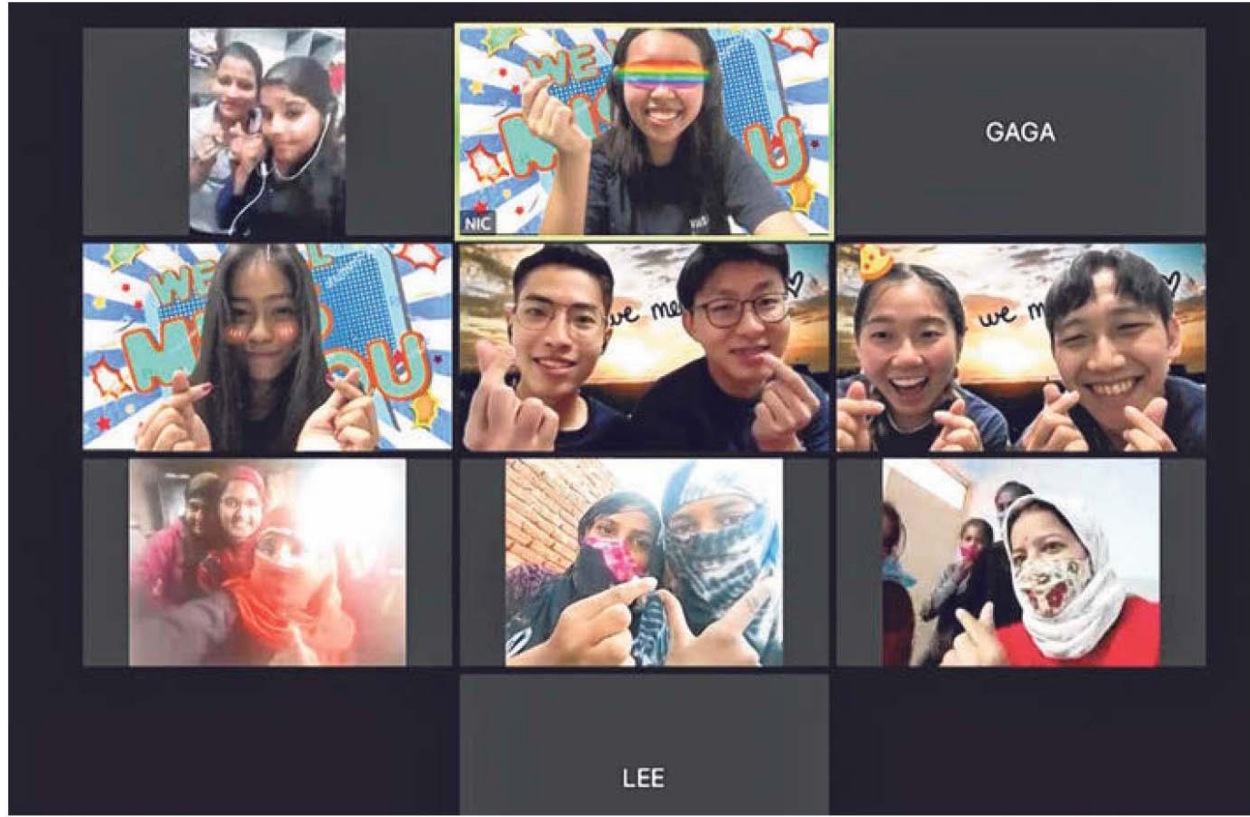
“While they were in lockdown, they had no structured education programme... unlike home-based learning in Singapore. Teachers there were struggling to get something going and were relying on physical materials,” said Ms Severino.

The group decided to teach educators to utilise online resources such as Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint and Microsoft Word, as well as navigate open-source websites and find catchy videos on YouTube.

This was done via videoconferencing platform Zoom, with five high schools and three elementary schools. Some 280 teachers from the Philippines participated.

Said Ms Severino: “Initially, there was disappointment (that we could not go to the Philippines in person). But, though we had to do a new project from scratch, it was a rewarding experience.”

A second group of SMU students planned to travel to Jaipur, India, to teach street children and destitute women conversational English, mathematics and financial literacy. This was in partnership with I-India, a non-governmental organisation based there.



A screenshot from a Zoom lesson by Project Vikasa, run by a group of students from the Singapore Management University. They taught children from India basic subjects like English and mathematics virtually, after plans for a physical overseas community service trip had to be scrapped due to the Covid-19 pandemic. PHOTO: PROJECT VIKASA

But when Covid-19 struck, Project Vikasa had to move to a virtual medium too. The 30-strong group decided to focus on children despite the challenges.

Mr Li Zeyu, 22, a second-year business student and one of the group leaders, said conducting the project virtually on Zoom meant it was more difficult to retain the children’s attention. “It was a lot of thinking on the spot and seeing what worked for them,” he added.

For example, there was a lesson on animals where they were going through worksheets with the children and using a presentation slide-sharing method to teach.

Some children responded better to pictures and videos, so the group switched to virtual drawing boards and YouTube videos.

They also spoke with the children over Zoom to build connections with them.

“We showed our commitment to

them despite the circumstances,” said Mr Li.

Another team, which had planned to carry out a project in Malaysia, decided to serve a children’s home in Singapore instead.

The 19 members of Project Xingfu IX initially wanted to help Rohingya women and children in Malaysia by equipping them with basic life skills. However, the women and children lacked IT access, which meant that the project could not be continued even virtually.

After discussions, the group decided to partner Jamiyah Children’s Home in Singapore.

Said Ms Fyra Ng, 25, a third-year business student and one of the team leaders: “We aimed to ensure that, whatever background the children came from, they had equal opportunities.”

In December last year, the group conducted Zoom sessions – twice



A Jamiyah Children’s Home resident going through a Zoom lesson with SMU students, who taught the children skills such as how to use social media responsibly. PHOTO: JAMIYAH CHILDREN’S HOME

a day, two hours each – for a week. They taught the children skills such as how to use social media responsibly. Older children learnt basic IT and coding skills, interview etiquette and resume writing.

“The kids were so warm and

friendly even though they had to share computers. It made us reflect on how privileged we are compared with them and be thankful for our environment,” said Ms Ng.

jolenezl@sph.com.sg