Recruit

Careers in the Education Sector

A special joy

Ngee Ann-Adeleide Education Centre graduate Tai Lee Kian is happy to make a difference in the lives of her young charges.

by aaron tan

When polytechnic lecturer Ms Tai Lee Kian was walking in the street one day, a young man called to her and said: "Teacher, thank you for the A+.

Ms Tai, who teaches at Nanyang Polytechnic's (NYP) School of Chemical and Life Sciences, recalls that the student had been worried about his future, because he did not do well during his first two years of studies.

"He told me I had motivated him to work hard and given him confidence. Because of that, he excelled in his final year," she says. "It is really gratifying when students thank you for what you have done for them."

Such heart-warming anecdotes spur educators like Ms Tai, 39, to stay on for years in a profession that often requires them to double as mentors and school administrators.

A typical day for Ms Tai starts at 7.10am, and stretches till 9pm. Between classes, she prepares for lessons, updates students' attendance in the school system, marks assignments, sets tests and examination questions and handles student administrative matters.

"There are meetings and seminars to attend as well. There is no fixed schedule for any particular day. I manage my time according to priorities," she says.

Ms Tai's busy schedule has not deterred her from teaching at NYP for eight years now, as she feels a "special joy" whenever she is able to make a seemingly complicated concept understandable to her young charges.

"I feel happy whenever I see my students nodding as a sign that they understand what I am explaining," she says.

Outside the classroom, Ms Tai also spends time with students as a mentor. Her interactions with students bring "additional fulfillment", especially when guiding them in both academic and personal matters.

Finding opportunities

Ms Tai knew she wanted to be a lecturer early on, while she was studying for her polytechnic diploma.

"[I was inspired by] a lecturer who conducted the lessons in an appealing and easy-to-follow manner. Since then, I have always imagined myself as a lecturer and started looking for opportunities for a career in education," she says.

She joined NYP after working as a research assistant at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where she was also pursuing a part-time Master of Science degree. At NUS, the biochemistry graduate also supervised university students, as well as polytechnic students attached to her research lab, in their final-year projects.

To establish her career in the education sector, Ms Tai took a Master of Education (MED) programme offered by the University of Adelaide at the Ngee Ann-Adeleide Education Centre (NAA).

The programme, which she completed in June last year, is designed for educators who wish to study education at the postgraduate level.

"While students are required to complete courses over two years, those who have an undergraduate degree in education, or significant teaching experience like Ms Tai, are eligible for advanced standing.

I thought the programme would best help me upgrade my skills and knowledge that would be relevant and vital to my teaching," she says, adding that the programme offers a diverse range of electives such as leadership and curriculum planning.

Career progress

At NYP, Ms Tai is given ample opportunities to grow in her career. She is currently part of a teaching and learning task force that improves teaching and assessment practices.

"My reporting officer, who knows my strengths well, is always challenging me with new tasks. I feel she is able to bring out the best in me," she says.

In addition, Ms Tai says NYP encourages staff to attend seminars and workshops conducted by invited speakers. The polytechnic also sponsors staff to further their studies or take up relevant industrial attachments.

Ms Tai's biggest challenge came in 2011, when she was involved in developing a new course together with her course manager. This was on top of her scheduled classes and other daily tasks.

"We started everything from scratch," she says. "It was really challenging to come up with a course structure and syllabus within the limited timeframe. I consistently discussed the curriculum and pedagogies with my course manager and colleagues for the best possible course outcomes."

As part of the new course development, Ms Tai had to find 20 new industrial placements for her students. Eventually, after contacting many industry partners, she secured enough placements.

"We just had to keep trying and finding ways to resolve different issues that arose during the development. In the end, it was all very satisfying and was worth it," she says.

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