

all right

okay um thank you very much for uh taking time to talk to us um i spent between 2008 to 2017 in asia uh seven years in taiwan in three years in macau and i i of course i grew up in singapore so as i always say to people you can take me out of singapore but you cannot take singapore out of me

i when i'm in asia i took the opportunity to get in contact closer contact with all my colleagues and friends uh especially in singapore and three of your presidents the current one fading kai the former one uh tanjotran and the former former one citroen phong were all all my good friends and what i have observed in the last uh 20 years is the rapid rise of the intellectual ambiance and reputation of nus so much so that it it looked like nus is becoming a trailblazer of higher education in asia in asia and it is now ranked uh with the some of the best in the world such as yale and and harvard and mit so uh i thought that and since i came back to the us about three or four years ago um i i realized that people in the us simply had no knowledge whatsoever of this tremendous growth of higher education in general in particular nus so max and i said that we should sit down and write an article about the rise of nus both in the context of an asian university and in the context also as an intellectual center so that's why we have this we wanted to do this and in order to do this we had very long interviews with inchais and chochuan and also suzern but we come to the conclusion that we need to understand what the products of nus think about the university uh it's one thing to hear what the president's tell you but it's another that tells you people who actually have gone through the mills in nus and see how their life their lives either have changed transformed or you know just becoming better and how their relevance of being in asia today in the 21st century so that that's really our our goal in a nutshell

so so with that said zayn i wonder if you can start to start to give us some like initial background about your us history when did you attend a us uh what was it like back then was your general feeling and how have you kind of um yeah just give us some background on that i think would be helpful for us to frame the conversation

you're muted by the way

yes okay so i graduated from the nus business school in 2003 and i specialize in marketing yeah okay so having a special specialty in marketing actually it was a very um it gave me a lot of career choices to be honest right in terms of it can be anywhere from we don't even have to major in that particular um discipline in order to be considered for good career options i think the fact that um because nus business school is very reputable itself so in terms of um jobs um choices they are actually very a lot a lot even though i graduated in the year of sas yeah i would say i would say that okay most of my peers did not have a big problem landing a job of course we're not talking about that ideal career right because i mean as as fresh graduates we don't really have that high expectations when it comes to job and we were um we were it was a realistic kind of expectations so we did not have too much of a problem everybody landed a job very quickly i did not know of any of my peers who would drop this for a while in fact it was like

within a one maximum one two months kind of thing everybody landed a job so to me that is like um it is the recognition of the university okay and and that we are widely accepted and people do recognize us um even though i'm not sure whether at that time nus was one of the top yet like like today like today but no right yeah it's not right yeah so i believe that um even at that juncture we did not have problems with jobs so now with this elevated status i'm sure the demand will even will be even higher

did you did you go on for um advanced degrees or just bachelor's degree oh just specialist okay okay so you didn't go for mba so at that time do they have mbas uh yes they have but it wasn't as popular as it is today okay okay yeah okay so and also because of my area of job that's why mba was not something that i pursued um i actually pursued something that's more relevant to the career that i'm in so i'm in financial services which also means um there's your insurance your investments um or wealth accumulation and protection so right now i'm in a management position which is why um pursuing a relevant certification was actually more important to me than an mpa yeah so what i have is like what we call uh the chartered insurance agency manager yeah so that actually requires more on the job uh on the actual field yeah actual field experience yeah so in terms of um the university itself i feel that even after graduation right not just based on nus itself we also have a lot of support in the alumni okay for example for me i am part of the nus alumni and i actually take part in the toastmasters i mean the toastmasters club of the nus's alumni so in in that space they are always encouraging us to um to keep on learning um you know for toastmasters i think it is not it doesn't matter what field you are in and you will definitely benefit from it so i think the nus's alumni outreach was very strong yeah so and that actually helped us to to develop holistically as a person no matter which field that we are in so from the nus toastmasters club i actually met many people from all different different different careers and i think with that bond um we were able to actually support one another in our areas of school

yeah so i think that sense of belonging because in that club you see people who are uh maybe like yourself uh profound you know uh who are veterans and they still come back and contribute to the club and we have very very young members uh who may have just graduated yeah so i feel that sense of belonging the community spirit is very strong even stronger now than before

well actually it's interesting uh since you graduated in 2003 which uh that means it's a three course in those days right i'm sorry it is what it is a three-year course yes three-year course correct that one-year honors is that right that's right yes yeah right yeah so if you want to get an honest you have to finish four years yes correct uh yeah you know it's interesting because uh citroen phone came to become president in 2001 so this is just the beginning of his reading and it was under his leadership uh that nus made this enormous transformation uh where he i think he left in 2009 or 2008 for a couch and then of course cho chuan came in and then eventually uh and chai came in uh and it is the 20 year that what you have observed you know even though you were not in nus at that period but nus you actually have the opportunity to observe nus transform that if you can go into something about how you view the nus transformation in the last 20 years since you graduated and that would be very very helpful okay maybe i can just um because i was still very very involved in the alumni i can share with you one

of the initiatives that i thought was um really wonderful they actually called okay they have this mentorship program the nuss mentorship program okay so i was involved in that where industry people um all the um the graduates from different industries had the opportunity to sign up as mentors okay to become mentors to undergraduates and i had the privilege to actually um experience one of these mentorships yeah so i was actually mentoring someone out of my industry totally different industry if i'm not wrong he was in engineering engineering yeah so what was excellent about this is that we were actually imparting um skills that are transferable in terms of like people skills in terms of um it may not be a in the same industry but they were able to pick up skills that helped them to to have a better understanding of how it works in the working world and i feel that this initiative is was paramount to a lot of um increased skill sets of the undergraduates who are not out there working yet and they were able to so for me uh what i did was we had a course a whole year i met my mentee for about three four times and that was even during the years and we did on zoom we did face to face and there was this um commitment to each other yeah so we spent we set aside time and all that so i feel this is one initiative that yeah yeah that i feel um is it was really um it is pretty new i would say i i can't i can't tell uh how long has it been ongoing but i think uh i think max will be able to find out quite easily yes i think this is this was a very very good initiative this is quite quite uh unusual that even though you graduated 17 18 years ago you still maintain such close uh close relationship with your alma mater um maybe because singapore is small so you you're it's easy for you to do that you know in the u.s it's not so easy once you graduate you leave the post yeah in singapore you're just around the corner but still i think that the university and u.s maintains such activities for you to tap into or for them to tap into you is is very important for them to develop this relationship i would say so it's a win-win we mean because um yeah for the employers they want to like for example i'm hiring so it does give me a greater rich outreach to the undergraduate market at the same time is for the undergraduates to know what what other what are their options in the market as well even before they graduate so i think this was offered to um undergrads in their third and fourth grade i'm not around not not the year one and year two but in the fourth year and your company is a singapore company or international company okay i work for prudential pressure is a uk company yeah yeah yeah yes so you actually uh hire people that may go to the uk uh no i hire locals because in um in singapore the financial if we have a financial planners they have to be locals okay yes and you only hire people from the business schools or in general uh no general general so i'm sure there are people there are people who completed maybe engineering i found out that engineering was not for them yeah yeah there could also be people yeah sociology so for for our industry it's a little bit more unique of course business graduates have the upper hand they have advantage because they are finance trained yeah but other than that a lot of our work is actually um trained on the job itself so i look for skill sets like um self-driven individuals you know willingness to learn

traits like that more than the discipline they are from one last question uh you hire both nus and ntu graduates right yes i do you see any difference between the two uh yes i do so i think um um okay so far i have had one um ntu business school graduate okay but um for anywhere squared um okay back in okay i would say there's there's a bit of a transformation over here yeah this i can i can actually share with you because i do meet candidates from different universities so in the earlier years i used to prefer smu and sim graduates yeah reason being

they were they could present themselves better and they could express themselves better i think they are exposed to a lot more project work than we were so because i was from marketing so i would say our project work um was actually quite a fair bit but compared to maybe like finance um and accounting we already have a lot more but the smu and sim was even more exposure you can tell because when they they come for interviews the image is a little bit different they are more confident when they are presenting themselves their ideas and it seems like they are very well trained in that manner yes so back in uh but over the years i find that nus graduates when i meet them they are a little bit different from the time during my time yeah almost to the point that i do not have a preference over um over smu and as i am anymore yeah in the beginning i would say i am i was very very disappointed by nus business school graduates when i when i compare them right yeah wow that's a big change max yeah uh actually a follow-up question on that regards you you went through in us yourself and over the years you've been maintaining a close tie how do you see like what are students learning differently are they is the mindset of students different from like when you're learning and now those students are they kind of preparing for a different job market when they're going out do you feel like what's the difference among the student mindset are they there to for specialties or are they here for something else did you observe any of the mindset transfer transformation amount of students yes okay i had the privilege recently because we hire both graduates and um

degree holders as well as diploma holders okay so i've had the chance over the last couple of months to interact with many diploma holders who are considering um their courses in university and i and a lot a lot of them have this concern and the concern is that with the changes in the way that we hire and they are afraid of becoming obsolete okay maybe i put business school aside i actually had i spoke to a few who were going into engineering and they were actually very concerned that the manufacturing industry will become less they would require less manpower than before and because of that um they were looking at courses if i'm not wrong they were comparing with okay sorry i need to get this information for you later on but they were comparing with a course in ntu um that they felt will prepare them better for the future so i think for many of this um they have not gone into university yet their concern will be is it still relevant like when they graduate will their skill set still be relevant to um to the industry maybe four to five years from now well so especially so yeah the cliched is that the job that they were eventually working may not have been invented yet yes yes yeah right perform so right yes that that is the problem so to them they can't they can't predict how so therefore do you think that nus uh not only gives you a knowledge base training but also teach you how to learn

yes i think it's the so when i speak to them i share with them that it's not about the content the content that you want of course the content is one thing right but more importantly is the analytical skills that you pick up yeah and they do they do agree with me and i share with them um how we for example in business school the old ways that we learn marketing how to advertise on buses on trains on newspaper today the university is definitely not teaching that anymore and so with the involvement of the way that we are doing like now with social media and all that digital marketing they they will realize that even though um these have changed but the skill set in terms of like maybe analytical skills presentation skills all these are evergreen

yeah and i do find over the years nus has placed more emphasis on his skills rather than the content of the textbooks

do you also hire people who are returning graduates from foreign universities yes so our criteria is actually pretty straightforward we do not uh okay as long as their degree holders are diploma holders and as long as they are local or singapore prs we can hire them our issue is yeah are they is there any difference between those and the nus graduates

[Music]

in the past yes in the past i would like how i categorize smu and as i am for returning graduates they tend to be more vocal and more expressive and they will usually have a lot of ideas they think out of the box but recently i would say there has been a change even the nus graduates right because um in the thomas masters group i actually have i've attended the nus undergraduate toastmaster club before and i was very impressed by the way um by the train of thought to me it seems like they've already been out there working very mature way of thinking so i'm sure something must have changed over the years that's right that allowed them to step up in that manner that's right yeah and yes and the club the toastmasters undergraduates club was managed in a very professional way that i was taken aback i just attended that club meeting maybe of last month and i was taken aback by the quality the quality of this undergraduates will graduate next year wow that's good yeah yeah one match i have is to follow up on on zinc what you previously said sorry excuse me students were concerned that the skill they are acquiring will be obsolete uh we've heard about that from the ministry of education ministry of manpower and university president because hey they're looking at job changes they're looking at the numbers they know with automation some jobs will have to be replaced because they have access to all the data but i was pleasantly surprised to hear that students were also aware of that did that happen to new grads who is in the job market or are they like new students who is about to enter university at what level do they have that awareness because recall my university when i entered university i did not think about the job market at all right yes so this batch that i had the privilege of speaking to they have not entered university okay there is a trend in singapore for those who complete um their junior college or their diploma i realized they have this trend of taking a gap year those this did not happen in my in my days we were usually right after university or right after a levels we go right to the um sorry for a levels we go right into university and then we go right into the workforce but today's kids are a little bit different they tend to take a gap year one or two years okay so i asked them what is the reason for taking this gap year is a lot of them chose to take this gap year because they were not sure what caused to go into and frequently in this one gap year they want to try out a job perhaps if they were thinking of going to a specific industry they might take up a part-time job okay or a temporary job in the industry that they want they foresee themselves going into it's like a trial period for them to think through whether this is the course that i really want yeah yes let's answer your question yeah so well it sounds like today students are entering the university much more prepared and aware of what's going on i mean probably partly empowered by the access to information now so universal and that you know they probably have more access to information than we all do so uh so they got to figure things out much earlier yes yeah they're

thinking ahead so it's it's amazing it's amazing so this this shows that the students in singapore are far more sophisticated now than 20 years ago well i do it's definitely wonderful that's a singapore only thing that's global younger generation thing

yeah sure maybe we should do some research into that as well because it was a very high percentage of people who are taking a gap year i'm not so sure is it because but most of them the reason they told me was they were not very percent sure uh which course to go into well also it's a year that that their parents can support them

right i mean if the parents cannot support them it may not be so easy to take a gap year but most of them in the gap year they are working oh they'll find a job i see yeah they will find a job they're either a part-time job or a temporary jobs so i was also very um i was very amazed by that because um even though some of these young people even though the parents can't support that university they should say yeah i want to support my own studies right we're up to your half an hour limit uh maybe i can just ask uh you know uh nus have tremendous transformation in the last 20 years and i discussed this often with uh trend phone and also with um engchai and that is nus is an asian university it is not a north american university it's not a british university and the because it is such a good school today in terms of reputation and in terms of real strength many of the nus leaders graduates will become leaders in asia one way or another and how important it is that nus gives a solid grounding of understanding asia in the 21st century because as we can see in the last 10 years china is a major factor today whether you like it or not you know politics aside it is a i mean you know asean countries uh that the asean country is now the top trading partner of china and so understanding china which is a hugely complex and convoluted country is not simple so how do you think that nus an outstanding university like nus is uh shouldering this responsibility

okay maybe i can just share with you my experience in the business school i remember we had a specific module on asia pacific business

so it was it was um and that was in 202 203 one of my final year modules and i realized that even though at that point i think the university already realized that in terms of business in terms of leadership um we not just have to be local but we need to understand the asia an asia-pacific way of doing business right however that module was short yeah so what i feel that if um in terms of what the university can do is to dedicate more modules to them in terms of not just in terms of operations in terms of the culture in terms of the difference of in the in the environment in the people and all that so i feel uss nus can do more in that area because that is for business school i'm not sure whether um other disciplines are doing the same thing other schools are doing the same thing for the students yeah but i do agree with you it is very vital because um

globalization i think asia asia is where the key uh where the growth areas are and nus can do more to prepare its students to become leaders in the area because now everything is not just localized no matter i mean we're talking about uh you know um because the things that we buy they don't come from our country anymore right everything it comes from everywhere yeah so i think yes everywhere everywhere yeah yeah yeah that is certainly true well i think we're up to

your half an hour time lots uh max no i think that's uh that's that's it thank you for taking the time to interview with us uh we have your email so i need that you have ours as well so if you have any uh question for us or if you have any questions i mean we may are we okay to stay in touch on over email sure yep thank you okay thank you thank you thank you so much for your time you're most welcome i wish you success in your article like your publisher thank you so thank you all right thanks a lot for your time and everything thank you thank you thank you okay bye-bye