



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

# Why a university of the arts now?

The new university is a major milestone and comes at a time when the arts and technology are opening up new channels of creativity



**Chan Heng Chee**  
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When then Minister of Education Lawrence Wong announced in Parliament in March last year that a university of the arts would be formed from an alliance of two arts colleges, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) and the Lasalle College of Arts, the Government took a leap of faith to stake a place for Singaporeans in a rapidly evolving future economy and society.

The establishment of the University of the Arts Singapore (UAS) is a statement about how we understand the world in the coming decades and how we continue to prepare our people for these uncharted changes. Facing this future, we need to harness all types of knowledge, skills and sensibilities and call upon greater imagination and creativity.

It is a major milestone for Singapore and recognition that the arts scene has developed rapidly, with great energy to reach for and sustain high standards of quality. Importantly arts development enjoys the growing support of our people and society. The National Arts Council 2020 Population Survey on the Arts revealed that 82 per cent of the 2,035 people surveyed see the arts fostering greater dialogue and understanding between different generations; 81 per cent believe it

gives us a greater sense of belonging to Singapore; 81 per cent say the arts reflect who we are as a society and country, 80 per cent, something Singaporeans can be proud of; and 79 per cent think arts draw Singaporeans closer as a community.

This growth of the arts has happened over more than 30 years. In 1989, the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts produced a report to help facilitate the transformation of Singapore into a culturally vibrant society.

The Government set about building an ecosystem to support arts and culture in Singapore. The Renaissance City Plan 2000 cemented the idea that arts and culture was important to enhance the quality of life in Singapore and make the city state a more liveable and attractive place.

### THREE KEY REASONS

Why establish a university of the arts now? There are three compelling arguments for this initiative.

First, it is highly important that we create access and opportunity for people with different aptitudes in Singapore.

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa), founded in 1938, and Lasalle College, in 1984, have been attracting an increasing segment of our population who wish to receive a formal education in the arts. Students from the region have been drawn to these institutions for an arts education. The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in the National University of Singapore founded in 2003 has nurtured cohorts of talented musicians. School of the Arts Singapore (SoA) opened its doors in January 2008 to provide an

education for pupils to develop their artistic inclinations and follow a secondary academic curriculum. These arts institutions have produced generations of creative talent who have won honours in Singapore such as Cultural Medallions, and Young Artists Awards, and international awards for their achievements in the visual art, music, film, media and design sectors.

Our young people who wish to pursue their artistic passion and aspire to be among the world's best want their aspirations to be facilitated. They should find their place in our university landscape. We would want to grow this talent. They will do well. Last year, eight out of 10 graduates from our two arts colleges found employment within six months of graduation.

Consider Sven Tan who studied fashion at Lasalle and founded In Good Company, one of our leading designers of minimalist style clothing. Ezzam Rahman, a product of Lasalle and Nafa, a sculptor and multidisciplinary artist and arts educator now the Artistic Director of Substation, Justin Loke, a multidisciplinary artist from Nafa who has an active practice. Natalie Henneidge, Festival Director of Singapore International Festival of Arts 2022-2024 and Sandhya Suresh of Chowk Productions, an accomplished classical Indian dancer. They add beauty and joy to our lives.

Second, the creation of a university of the arts at this juncture can help Singapore catalyse into an abode of artistic excellence. It will raise our game to become a regional centre for creative talent and a fulcrum for exploring the richness of diversity.

There is a reason why Nafa and Lasalle are in an alliance rather than a merger to form a government-supported private university. It is a unique model and speaks to the desire to preserve the special traditions and history of each institution which add to the diversity of the arts.

As a larger entity, the UAS can form a strong nexus with industry as well as seek government support for resources. The UAS will be able to create strategic alliances with other universities to pursue excellence in art education, as well as attract practitioners and other creative people to the institution. Finally, as a larger entity, the UAS could emerge as a distinctive centre for an education in the arts in South-east Asia and later, the world.

Third, there is no doubt that as we face a world transformed by technology, hit by fluid and unpredictable changes, we require different mindsets to navigate this challenging reality. We have been fortunate that our arts institutional development has helped Singapore nurture a diverse talent pool which more than at any time in history is what is required.

### THE CONCEPTUAL ECONOMY

Daniel Pink in his highly influential book, *A Whole New Mind* (2005), argued that we have moved from the Knowledge Economy to the Conceptual Economy. The Knowledge Economy placed a premium on analytical and logical thinking skills (left-brained thinkers) to propel economic development and success. The Conceptual Economy, doctors, lawyers, engineers, medical researchers and others. The Conceptual Economy is based on high concept and high touch (right-brained thinkers). Creativity and innovation are buzz words of this time. Jobs are now created by people who can empathise and express themselves. They see what others are slow to see. They create products and services, like TikTok, Grab and Shopee. Simply put, people with creativity and empathy will be in high demand.

A university of the arts will encourage and nurture right-brained thinking and imagination. Today, we see the

intersection between art and technology leading to innovation and creating new excitement and opportunity. Our arts colleges have fully incorporated digital and technological elements in their courses. UAS will further equip its graduates with key skills for the creative industries.

Think of the names of who have been most influential in shaping the way we live in the last three decades. They are amazingly successful entrepreneurs. They prove beyond expectations what the artistic sensibility linked to technology can produce. The exemplars at the top are from Apple. Steve Jobs, the visionary leader of Apple Inc, was interested in electronics and literature. He audited a course on calligraphy. At a Stanford commencement speech, he said: "Imagine if I never dropped in on that single calligraphy course in college, the Mac would never have had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts."

Then there was Jony Ive, a British-American designer who became the Chief Design Officer of Apple until he left in 2019. Currently, he serves as Chancellor of the Royal College of Art in London and runs the college. Ive is the co-designer of the iMac, iPod, iPhone and iPad. He also designed with Steve Jobs, Apple Park and Apple Stores. In high school, Ive studied sculpture and chemistry, then industrial design in the polytechnic, and was influenced by the German Bauhaus movement. Ive's collaborator in Apple was Marc Newson, an Australian industrial designer. Newson studied jewellery and sculpture in the Sydney College of Art and was going to be a jeweller and silversmith. Ive and Newson worked together on the Apple Watch.

Art combined with technology can add up to fun too. This is what Nickson Fong, the Singapore computer graphics artist turned film maker who excelled in animation and won an Academy

Award for Technical Achievement in 2013, produces. He was a graduate of Nafa before going to the United States and worked for Dreamworks. Fong co-invented an animating technique known as "Pose Space Deformation" which makes animated figures more life-like and was used in films like Spider-Man and Avatar. Recently, he directed the American horror film *Bashira* released in 2021 which garnered a couple of awards at film festivals for its genre.

What these individuals show is that an art education can lead down many pathways and inspire young graduates to look at adjacent or new fields to engage their talent. Our graduates should keep an open mind about what they can and should do. Should a young graduate choose to practise her art to reach the pinnacle, there is the inspiring example of Jade Tan, a young Singapore mezzo soprano from YST Conservatory of Music continuing with a Master's degree in Hanover. She studies opera and looks for opportunities to perform, but has taken up a job as project manager in a Germany tech company that deals with electronics and instruments.

The world is changing and the job market is changing. Our idea of a career has been redefined. In every sector, people are expecting to hold varied portfolios through their lifetime even if they settle on a speciality. The University of the Arts will play a crucial role to prepare our students to be confident in their skills and abilities, enrich our society with their artistic endeavours and make a contribution to the economic landscape.

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