

SPECIAL FEATURE

The NUS Teaching Academy (NUSTA): An evolutionary tale

S. LAKSHMINARAYANAN¹, Erle LIM Chuen Hian²,
Bernard TAN Cheng Yian³, CHNG Huang Hoon⁴

¹ Acting Chair, 1st Executive Council, NUS Teaching Academy (Sep 2009-Jun 2010)
Director, Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (present)

² Chair, 2nd and 3rd Executive Council, NUS Teaching Academy (Jul 2010-Jun 2012)
Immediate Past Chair, NUS Teaching Academy (present)

³ Chair, 1st Executive Council, NUS Teaching Academy (Apr 2009-Sep 2009)
Vice Provost (Education) (present)

⁴ Director, Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (2008-2012)
Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education) (present)

Note: All authors are from the National University of Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Associate Professor S. Lakshminarayanan, NUS Teaching Academy,
Central Library Annexe, Level 7, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260. Email: cdthead@nus.
edu.sg

Recommended citation:

Lakshminarayanan, S., Lim, E. C. H., Tan, B. C. Y., & Chng, H. H. (2012). The NUS Teaching Academy (NUSTA): An evolutionary tale. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy*, 2 (3), 155-161.
<https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.23272>

The NUS Teaching Academy (NUSTA): An evolutionary tale

CREATION OF NUSTA

Like many universities, the National University of Singapore (NUS) has evolved, since its inception in ¹⁹⁰⁵, from its initial role of providing tertiary education to local undergraduates, to its current (equal) emphasis on teaching and research. NUS currently has more than ^{37,000} undergraduate, and more than ^{10,000} graduate students in ¹⁶ Faculties/Schools. The student body of NUS originates from more than ¹⁰⁰ countries. Three years ago, the NUS Teaching Academy (NUSTA), a think tank, was added to its educational landscape to invigorate the student body and faculty at a time of paradigm developments in higher education. Several motivating factors can be elucidated in support of this initiative, in a large and established educational ecosystem such as NUS¹:

- Independent and alternative voices are needed to act as a counterfoil to critically examine current university practices, some of which may become fossilised or risk fossilisation if regular reviews are not undertaken. A think tank can function as a platform for such independent and alternate voices, and to provide independent critique of existing university practices.
- The need to provide an additional avenue to incubate, experiment, and scale-up educational ideas for wider implementation and adaptation across the university. A think tank, comprising people having a wide range of talents from diverse disciplines and with a deep commitment to education, can serve this purpose well.
- Multiple platforms are required for active engagement of key stakeholders in the university (faculty members and students). A think tank can be very effective in building an active learner-educator community and providing a bridge between these stakeholders and the university administration.

In line with these motivating factors, NUSTA would engage in discussions about cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary teaching and learning issues, initiate and support innovative and experimental activities that can potentially enhance teaching and learning; create roadmaps for achieving targeted teaching and learning outcomes, conduct research and recommend new teaching and learning policies to the university administration, identify opportunities and gaps in the implementation

¹ In certain universities, such work may be carried out at a Teaching and Learning Centre. NUS has a very strong CDTL (Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning) but the creation of a well-positioned independent think tank outside the standard administrative structure was in tune with the maturity level reached at NUS as well as in line with its future aspirations. With the day-to-day pedagogical matters being handled by CDTL, the think tank could engage in philosophical, futuristic inquiries and debates about education.

of teaching and learning policies, and promote a culture that values and appreciates teaching and learning across the university, among others.

NUSTA was formally inaugurated in April ²⁰⁰⁹ after a significant amount of work, examining existing Teaching Academies elsewhere. The groundwork (which entailed rounds of discussion involving various sections of the community) was done by a four-member committee appointed by the Provost, led by the then Director of CDTL (Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning). NUSTA would thenceforth function as an independent entity, free to define its own targets, projects, and internal processes but supported with funds from the University.

COMPOSITION OF NUSTA

Right from its inception, NUSTA sought to have a wide representation, so as to be effective in community outreach efforts. Therefore, NUSTA would comprise faculty members from across the university and involve early, mid-career and senior faculty members from all career tracks. Fellows of NUSTA are selected from a cadre of academics who have invested significantly into the education of our students, or otherwise contributed significantly to the educational landscape of NUS. Thus, Fellows are selected based on past and sustained contributions to educational endeavors, and leadership and enthusiasm on matters related to teaching and learning. Many Fellows are recipients of multiple teaching excellence awards at Department, Faculty and University levels, but Fellows have also been elected simply because they have shown a deep commitment to education that goes beyond awards.²

NUSTA is led by a five-member Executive Council, elected every two years. In addition, the Vice-Provost (Education) and the Director of CDTL join the Executive Council as *ex officio* members³. Within the Executive Council, one member, elected as Chairman, would select a Vice Chairman. Together, they provide leadership of NUSTA, with other members of the Executive Council providing leadership in specific portfolios, such as outreach, projects, and publications.

The term of appointment for Fellows is three years. New Fellows are also elected each year to the Academy, based on a university-wide call for nominations, followed by a review and interview process conducted by a committee set up within NUSTA. All existing Fellows would then participate in a final vote. The Provost introduces and inducts new Fellows into the NUSTA at the University Awards Ceremony – an annual event that celebrates excellence in teaching, research, and service. This adds gravitas to the election process and signals to the community the commitment of

² The initial composition of NUSTA stands at 18 Fellows and two *ex-officio* members. The current composition of NUSTA stands at 33 Fellows and two *ex officio* members. Given that Fellows come from almost all Faculties, this profile is helpful for outreach purposes.

³ Initially, the Executive Council was elected for one-year terms. Now that NUSTA has reached a level of maturity, Fellows decided that it was time to elect the Executive Council on two-year terms (effective 2012).

the University to education in a very research-intense environment. Anna Kindler has, in the opening article of this issue, underscored the importance of balancing the two essential components (education and research) of a university's mission and mentioned the importance of communicating this to the community in authentic ways. The induction process of new Fellows each year serves this very essential purpose.

ACTIVITIES OF NUSTA

Fellows meet monthly to deliberate on key teaching and learning issues. Beyond the monthly meetings, the various project sub-committees hold separate meetings. The initial projects undertaken by NUSTA were those that required attention (e.g., review of student feedback system and peer review system) on a reasonably urgent basis. The longer term intention of NUSTA is to work on projects that have a more strategic focus (e.g., think about creative ways to incorporate technology into the classroom).

Monthly Meetings

During the monthly meeting of Fellows, updates are provided by project sub-committees, outreach activities and publication matters are highlighted, and a relevant teaching and learning topic is discussed. On a few occasions, the Provost has attended NUSTA meetings to meet with Fellows, gain first-hand knowledge of the aspirations of NUSTA, and share the vision and plans for education in the University. The Executive Council holds separate meetings to review progress of ongoing projects, deliberate on future possible initiatives, or define the direction of NUSTA. These regular meetings have helped in community building within NUSTA by maintaining a vibrant culture of discourse and promoting collegial understanding.

Existing Projects

The initial projects undertaken by NUSTA were a review of the student feedback system and the peer review system. These systems had served the University reasonably well for some years in providing quality assurance of teaching and learning. However, the educational landscape has changed in recent times, thereby necessitating a review of these systems. Two project sub-committees were formed to do a scholarly analysis of these systems considering emerging requirements. Their recommendations have been presented to the University leadership and to various groups of faculty members and students to seek feedback. Given that the proposed changes to these systems were perceived to be bottom-up rather than top-down (because these ideas come from NUSTA rather than the University leadership), faculty members and students were generous in giving their comments. This approach can potentially help to harvest more ideas from the community in the future. Through these projects, NUSTA has become an alternate voice in providing effective remedies for stagnated practices.

New Initiatives

For more than a decade, information and communications technology has been an integral part of the NUS education system. The community has used various technology platforms for teaching and learning. A recent initiative of NUSTA is to investigate the effectiveness of new modes of teaching and learning across a variety of contexts to outline a roadmap on technology-enabled pedagogy for the University. Again, the work is done mainly through community engagement, to “cast a wide net” for ideas. Beyond understanding what and how technology works for teaching and learning, this project also aims to pinpoint key conditions that facilitate technology-enabled pedagogy. This understanding can help the University to craft policies and provide resources that enable technology-enabled pedagogy.

Outreach Efforts

NUSTA achieves its purposes of community engagement, providing a platform for alternate voices, and promoting new ideas for teaching and learning by instituting an outreach arm. This arm has undertaken various outreach efforts:

- The teaching and learning club allows NUSTA to directly engage faculty members and students. This outreach platform was launched in early 2010. It has been instrumental for soliciting the views of faculty members and students on important issues, as well as sharing ideas with them. It is led by two Fellows, who define the discussion themes in consultation with the Executive Council. To date, the conversations have centred on projects undertaken by NUSTA (e.g., how to make the student feedback system and the peer review system more effective), major educational initiatives (e.g., curricular reforms for first year students), and issues pertaining to student learning (e.g., effects of online learning). Depending on the theme, the discussion could involve only faculty members, only students, or a mix of faculty members and students. On average, four to six such events have been organised each year. This platform has helped project sub-committees gather opinions as inputs. It has stirred up “warm” debates and its activities are archived (see [website](#)).
- The masterclass series is a means for NUSTA to receive external constructive disruptions, so as to stir up thinking about existing educational practices. Eminent educators who speak at public lectures (under the masterclass series) can challenge existing norms and offer novel ideas for teaching and learning. This provides much food for thought for NUSTA and the community. They can also conduct discipline-specific seminars in informal settings. Professor Lee Shulman, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University and President Emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation, was our first masterclass speaker (see [website](#)).
- Key members of the Executive Council participate in faculty orientation programmes to introduce NUSTA and emphasise the importance of teaching and learning in the University. They help new faculty members understand the

teaching and learning culture, the curriculum structure, and new pedagogical approaches, among others. Fellows are invited to share their thoughts and experience on teaching and learning at professional development programmes for new faculty members (the *Academy Chat*) conducted by CDTL twice a year. Fellows can serve as mentors to help new faculty members overcome anxieties and guide them in their efforts to balance teaching and research.

- As successful educators within their respective Faculties, Fellows also engage their colleagues and students more locally on Faculty or Department platforms. Their efforts help to sustain changes to educational practices at the micro level. These changes can then be consolidated meaningfully to constitute changes to educational practices at the macro level.

Publications

NUSTA contributes to knowledge dissemination (globally and locally) on teaching and learning issues, and publicises its work through several platforms:

- *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy* (JNUSTA) (started in ²⁰¹¹) aims to promote discussion on educational developments (the current article is featured in the fourth issue). Being an online journal which can feature multimedia materials, it has an online discussion forum to engage readers of its articles. The intention of the journal is to create and nurture a global network of educators, who can discuss education issues and trends. The aims and scope of the journal can be found at the [JNUSTA website](#). The first issue focused on global education. The subsequent two issues focused on a range of topics such as academic advising, use of technology for teaching and learning, classroom innovations, and fostering creativity in business education, among others.
- Academic journeys document past experience of colleagues in terms of how they have exploited opportunities, overcome challenges, or dealt with interesting situations in their career. The goal is to help faculty members be more cognisant of issues confronting them. To date, two academic journeys have been created (see [website](#)) through extensive interviews with the colleagues involved. These materials have been brought to the attention of new faculty members and used in workshops that are part of CDTL professional development programmes. Additional academic journeys would be created to feature the diverse career trails that colleagues have charted.
- Academy matters is a bi-annual newsletter that features NUSTA events, project updates, and future initiatives for the benefit of the community. It serves as a means to invite participation from the wider community in the activities of NUSTA.

SUMMARY OF NUSTA

In the past three years, NUSTA has emerged as an independent voice and an important change agent for advancing teaching and learning issues and strengthening educational culture in the University. Though it is still in an early stage of development, the progress made by NUSTA in stakeholder engagement (involving faculty members and students), critical examination of educational processes and policies, and harnessing ideas from the community for teaching and learning, has been notable. The University leadership has acknowledged the contributions of NUSTA, and other universities have expressed interest to set up similar Teaching Academies. The educational landscape has seen significant developments in recent times with the innovative use of technology that can radically transform the way universities educate students (e.g., Coursera and EdX). The possibilities offered by such developments for improving teaching and learning are enormous. Moving forward, NUSTA hopes to build on its accomplishments and continue to add value to the University by offering thought leadership on emerging educational developments so that the University can continue to be an exemplar on the educational front.

REFERENCES

- Kindler, A. M. (2012). Academia in the 21st century: Towards both a research and a teaching-intensive university. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy*, 2 (3), 125-130.