

Meet the young IPS



From left: Zhou Rongchen, Sim Jui Liang, Sarjune Ibrahim S/O Sitheek, Mohammad Khamsya bin Khidzer, Teo Jin Ye, Valerie Koh, Nanditha Das, Mamta Sachan Kumar and Tay Ek Kiat. Henry Ho is absent in this photograph.

By *Asad Latif*

Teo Jin Ye could have worked in a laboratory all his life conducting research on a gene or molecular pathway. But the 24-year-old Biomedical Science graduate chose to apply to IPS to study the building blocks of social life.

His goal is to be a part of a team of Research Assistants and Research Associates whose work supports that of the Research Fellows at IPS. In applying to work for the Demography and Family Cluster, he leveraged on his strengths in designing questionnaires, administering them, and analysing data. In particular, he hopes that young people like him will depend on sounder content than that presented by sensationalist social media in making up their minds on the issues of the day. The kind of research that IPS carries out should make a difference to the public's understanding and perceptions of policies, he says. His hope is to contribute to the sustenance of that policy environment.

Research Assistants and Research Associates – mostly in their 20s, but some more experienced – attest to the importance of younger Singaporeans in nurturing IPS' mandate, which is to promote a greater awareness of policy issues and good governance. In doing so, it adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analysis and takes the long-term view in its strategic deliberation and research.

Research Associate Nanditha Das, who is with the Arts, Media and Culture Cluster, is part of a pilot project that studies the blogosphere. “Scant attention has been given to non-English blogs in Singapore, specifically the Chinese, Malay and Tamil blogs,” she says. “We are embarking on this project to understand the landscape of non-English blogs: who Chinese, Malay and Tamil bloggers are, the size of their respective blogospheres, their reach, the issues that they blog about, their visions for blogging, and how they sustain ties with their readers.”

Expanding intellectual frontiers drew Mohammad Khamsya bin Khidzer to the Society and Identity Cluster. The Sociology graduate, whose interests are in issues of poverty, ageing and race, commends the “solidly-grounded research” being carried out by the cluster in encouraging him to reflect on his own position as a researcher from a minority group.

How have experiences of work matched expectations? The Economics and Business Cluster was a natural academic choice for Sarjune Ibrahim S/O Sitheek, who arrived with a Master’s degree in Applied Economics. But little did he know how swiftly IPS would prepare him for the real world.

One of his biggest challenges appeared when a speaker for the Singapore Economic Roundtable pulled out of the conference two weeks before the date. His cluster and the administrative staff moved into overdrive. “We did get a replacement speaker for the conference, but owing to the lack of time, I was roped in to dedicate two weeks to support the speaker. At the end of the two weeks, I could firmly say that I was a complete macroeconomist because I was crunching down economic indicators, analysing trends, and preparing reports for the speaker. This experience enhanced my respect for the work that macroeconomists do.”

Valerie Koh Xin Ying, who joined IPS with a post-graduate degree in Political Science, cut her teeth on the Prism project. Along with Gillian Koh and Jason Loe, an external consultant, she worked to develop the IPS Prism Survey, which aimed to measure political attitudes in Singapore; and with a team from Drama Box and Arts Wok to translate a set of scenarios into the IPS Prism Immersive Arts Experience. That public exhibition comprised interactive exhibits, a multi-media show, and a forum theatre play.

Tay Ek Kiat, too, finds the Prism Immersive Arts experience a “memorable” project because of its large scale and “the many interesting responses that we got from attendees”.

For Zhou Rongchen, with an educational background in Psychology and an interest in language issues, working for the Society and Identity Cluster gave him a better understanding of social issues and the policy considerations behind them. “On a personal level, I have gained first-hand experience doing actual research work. This includes being involved in various stages of the research process, from background literature search, to data analysis using data analysis software, to writing and editing.”

Similarly, the Social Lab offered Henry Ho Mun Wah the opportunity to use what he knew and loved – statistics – to gain greater insights into Singapore. But for Mamta Sachan Kumar, who read Sociology, the Social Lab offered her the opportunity to work in an unfamiliar field and thus gain a different set of experiences.

Sim Jui Liang’s twin interests in social science research and the media motivated him to apply to IPS, where he is a member of the Arts, Culture and Media Cluster. He hopes that the Institute’s research findings can be used by policymakers to “fine-tune or implement policies for the benefit of Singapore society, including our artists, media professionals and cultural practitioners”. There is another reason why he is excited by his work. “As researchers, the questions we ask our interviewees might challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions; hence, their reflections on their own work might indirectly lead to the flourishing of Singapore’s arts, culture and media sectors.”

For these researchers, their work at IPS is not just a job but a vocation in their search for an even better future for Singapore.