

## Late bloomer blossomed during JCU postgraduate course and pursued doctorate soon after

*“Every person has the potential to achieve. Sometimes the potential is realised because someone else believes in him. Be that someone to people around you.”*

-Timothy Hsi

Soon after starting work as a counsellor at the Singapore Management University (SMU) in 2003, Timothy Hsi was encouraged by his boss, the Dean of Students, to pursue higher education as part of his professional development. He decided to enrol for the part-time [Master of Guidance and Counselling](#) (MGC) programme at [James Cook University's](#) Singapore campus (JCU) in 2004 as it would provide him with the “grounding, qualification and credibility” for his role at SMU. It also suited his budget and work schedule. He was also attracted to the applied nature of the course based on coursework with practicum that prepares students for the real world. The learning experience was to become a turning point in his career and personal development. He graduated as the top student in 2005.

As Timothy would recall years later, the MGC course had given him a sound theory base for counselling work. MGC is [accredited](#) by the Australian Counselling Association and [recognised](#) by the Singapore Association for Counselling. “It was where I found my footing as a practitioner and confidence in my academic ability,” he shared. His consistently good results for all his modules changed his perspective about himself as a learner. Before that, he had always believed that he was just “an average student without much academic ability”, based on his academic results in school until his undergraduate education at university. When he started to do well at JCU, he was encouraged to keep going and to believe in his own capabilities. He also realised that what he had learnt at work as a student counsellor at SMU could supplement or reinforce his learning in MGC classes.

Timothy found that the MGC degree added value to his professional work. “The course solidified my purpose as a professional helper, honed my skills as a counsellor and deepened my knowledge base that powerfully enhanced my work at SMU,” he revealed. He would encourage others to consider taking skill-based courses that will deepen their mastery of specific skills over academic programmes that may not necessarily enhance their employability. His MGC learning journey and achievements had benefited him well beyond his graduation from the course. Not long after, he embarked on his doctoral journey in 2009 and completed it in 2016. For Timothy, continuing education was about planning for the next learning milestone as he progressed along the way.

### ***Experiencing secondary school education as an average student***

Timothy remembered himself as an average student as a teenager based on his academic performance. In secondary school, he would look forward to the end of classroom lessons each day so that he could spend time with his buddies in St John Ambulance extracurricular activities (ECA) that he enjoyed while forging friendship with them. He learnt to apply first aid and took part in camps, and in first aid and foot drill competitions. He was also a member of the St John Band, first as a clarinetist before becoming a band major. In hindsight, he realised that his learning then was “really not so much academic” in nature but the soft skills that he had unknowingly developed. Skills like communication, leadership, organising and strategic thinking that he had gained were to become useful when he started his career.

In junior college, he continued to develop his soft skills. There, he met his future wife in the first year, and this was to become the “most significant point” of his life, as their friendship blossomed into a decision that has shaped his life since. “It was the same sense of determination and purpose that I displayed in my ‘chase’ before she agreed to be my girlfriend,” he would recall. They tied the knot 10 years later.

Looking back to those six early years, Timothy realised that he was “actually quite clueless” as to what he wanted to do with his life. He did not know what he wanted in life or consider what his life goals should be. “I was just enjoying myself with the ECA activities then,” he admitted. Most of his friends in class did not know either and just wanted to have fun and studied only to pass examinations at the end of the year. “Perhaps this perspective was common in my class, which was placed in the lower spectrum of my cohort,” he mused to himself years later.

### ***Continuing his education full-time at university***

After completing his national service, Timothy enrolled for the Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme in sociology and geography at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Like his peers, he saw a university degree as his passport to getting a job with a good salary. He chose sociology after he was told by professors in his first year that sociology graduates could find jobs in different fields of work. Being the pragmatist that he was, he also picked geography so that he could teach it in schools, in case he “fails to find a job”. However, his learning journey at NUS had not been smooth sailing.

With his “lack of academic ability” (in his own words) as a young man in his 20s then, he had found it challenging to understand what he was reading and was a “below-average” student in his undergraduate years. It did not help that he was experiencing a constant headache whenever he tried to read up on the subjects he was studying. Fortunately for him, he could depend on his friends to explain what were being taught over a meal or coffee that he gladly paid for. From his personal experience at NUS, he realised that people could develop differently in their own time. As a late

bloomer himself, he can empathise with students and sees it as his responsibility as an educator to guide and nurture them to reach their potential at their own pace.

Timothy took his learning journey at NUS in his stride and was “doing what everyone else was doing”. For him, “it was a matter of completing every piece of work that came along, completing every reading assignment that I had to and trying to understand as much as I could”. What he had also found useful from his undergraduate education were the organising, social, leadership and collaborative skills that he had developed during the two years when he was a committee member of the NUS Geographical Society. These skills were to prove useful in his first job.

### ***Continuously learning at work after graduating from university***

Soon after obtaining his BA degree from NUS in 1994, Timothy started work at the National Youth Council, where he was coordinating its events and corporate communications. While what he had learnt about geography and sociology might not be directly relevant to his job, knowledge of the youth segment of society gained from the sociology classes was put to good use in understanding the needs of youth organisations. Three years later, he joined a secondary school as a counsellor. After six years, he was given the opportunity to apply what he had learnt at work to provide counselling to students at Singapore Management University (SMU). There, he found himself continuously learning on the job while advancing his full-time career and continuing his education part-time for the next 12 years.

When he was tasked to set up SMU counselling service, Timothy visited counselling centres and Family Service Centres in Singapore to learn how they were offering their services. He also contacted people in the field to learn from their experiences and best practices. From the start-up experience, he learnt that there’s no fixed formula for setting up a venture or business. For SMU, what were needed were: an idea that’s relevant to the time; a strong supporter (his boss who’s Dean of Students); and a core group of supporters who believed in the service.

The schools’ administrators in SMU had been referring many students who needed mental health support to him for counselling. His boss Assoc Prof Low Aik Meng had noted: “Realising that he could not single-handedly reach all students who needed help, Timothy implemented a peer-counselling programme at the university by enlisting students with an interest in helping others to extend his reach. He developed a peer-helping module to provide the students with facilitation and mentoring skills.” This eventually became a course module at SMU. He learnt from starting the SMU Peer Helpers programme the importance of having students trained to reach out to their fellow students who needed help to tell them about the counselling service available. The peer helpers would enable it to serve more internal ‘customers’ and to grow with the recruitment of more full-time staff for a counselling centre. The peer helpers themselves benefited, as the skills learnt proved to be useful in

their careers and personal lives. When other institutions learnt of the course, Timothy helped them to set up similar programmes.



*Singapore Management University students in its Peer Helpers programme attending Timothy Hsi's Peer Mentoring and Facilitation course at a camp in 2007. There they learnt more about peer counselling (through lessons facilitated by Timothy) and played games and participated in activities like team building for bonding. The experience reinforced the idea that teaching and learning could take place in both formal and informal settings. (Photo: Timothy Hsi)*

Besides counselling SMU students, Timothy served as an advisor to the SMU Peer Helpers. In this role, he learnt to delegate and to trust his student teams to come up with ideas to educate the student community on issues such as mental health and wellness. Most of the time, his role was to provide support, guidance and encouragement. It was a similar experience when he was a member of the University Council of Student Conduct from 2006 to 2015. He would also provide guidance and support while enabling the student teams to 'run the show'. In his role as hostel master of SMU Residences@Prinsep (2007 to 2015), he further applied the approach of empowering the student leaders living in the hostel to lead the juniors staying there. He would provide broad guidance, leadership and direction for the student teams to design and organise activities. For Timothy, it was about letting them grow to trust their own judgement and giving them the space to make mistakes.

Timothy was also a member of the MOE National Education Committee from 2008 to 2013. From the experience, he realised the importance of national education in building students' sense of identity. He also learnt from the policies made by the committee that international students and migrants seeking to live in a foreign country would need to make the effort to integrate with the local population. They could do this by learning the host country's languages, accepting and practising its

customs, and embracing its culture instead of sticking to their own. He also served in the Community Engagement sub-committee that was involved in national security education until 2014.

From all the above responsibilities that were part of his full-time job at SMU, Timothy learnt the importance of growing into each given task while expanding it by continuing to create new dimensions to it. There's also a need to prioritise different tasks at hand accordingly at any one time, such as meetings to attend, people to meet and papers to write.

### ***Pursuing higher education part-time while working as a full-time counsellor***

Timothy's enrolment for JCU's MGC programme in 2004 was timely and most beneficial to his professional development. He had the opportunity to test what he learnt at JCU to his work at SMU. He also applied his MGC learning to continually improve the counselling service at SMU. "Being taught by professors who were counselling experts in Australia had helped my learning tremendously," he shared.

His MGC learning journey had its own set of challenges to overcome though. Besides setting aside time after his full-time work three times a week and a full weekend every two months to attend classes, he had to cope with an unexpected financial stress in his family. He shared: "My wife's bridal business collapsed in 2003 due to the SARS pandemic and I had to balance our finances very carefully during the two years I was studying for the MGC. Every cent had to be saved to provide for the family." At that time, his son was three and his daughter was just born. He had to use credit cards to pay for the school fees and to pay back the minimum sums each month in order to stretch his limited resources. The difficult situation made him more determined to complete the course so that he would be able to build a better future for himself and his family. "In my heart, I knew I needed to do it for my family while we were dealing with the financial crisis at hand," he shared further.

After graduating from JCU, Timothy found that he could apply "everything" that he had learnt from the MGC course. He explained: "The different counselling theories learnt could be applied to different types of cases presented by clients. The counselling skills acquired helped me to connect with them and to ask powerful questions that would evoke a lot of thought and breakthrough for them." He could use the right assessment tools to determine a client's mental state and create counselling programmes for his employer by applying ideas learnt in MGC classes. He even modelled SMU's eventual counselling centre in 2013 based on what he had envisioned in one of his MGC assignments back in 2004!

According to JCU's Singapore Campus Dean and Head of Teaching, Learning and Student Engagement Prof Abhishek Singh Bhati, the MGC programme was developed to train counsellors in Singapore, and is open to those with and without counselling experience. "It is being taught by experienced and practising counsellors who are professionally recognised," he added.



*After attending a certification course on online assessment in Singapore in 2014, Timothy was able to use assessment tools to help clients to understand their personality. (Photo: Timothy Hsi)*

### ***Learning as a part-time academic teacher***

After completing his MGC course at JCU in June 2005, Timothy began to teach an undergraduate course “Peer Mentoring and Facilitation” at SMU’s Lee Kong Chian School of Business and later at its School of Social Sciences as an adjunct faculty member, a position he held until 2016. The experience taught him how to effectively mark hundreds of student assignments by the due date. He also learnt to be patient with each assignment submitted and to offer constructive comments to aid each student’s understanding of what’s taught in class.

From 2006 to 2016, Timothy also taught part-time at JCU in Singapore as a sessional lecturer teaching core courses such as counselling theories and advanced counselling in its MGC programme, the same course that he had graduated from. Beginning in 2016, he also took on the role of placement supervisor. He soon realised that institutions of learning that operated commercially would need to carefully balance profitability and educational standards. This learning point has been applied in his own business. “Standards for training cannot be sacrificed for profitability,” Timothy stressed. This belief has become a core value of his own enterprise.

In 2016, Timothy started to teach counselling courses at diploma, bachelor and master levels as a sessional lecturer at the Australian College of Applied Psychology in Adelaide. The experience to date taught him the importance of work experiences in teaching and learning. He has noticed that the students in Australia don’t respect their teachers because of their paper qualifications but for their real-life experiences that would enable them to apply theory in practice.

From the above experiences as a teacher, Timothy realised that teaching is the best way to learn a topic or subject. He explained: “When we teach, we have to ensure that we have a strong knowledge base to be able to cite examples and draw materials from.” For him, learning from teaching is one of the best ways to keep learning.



*Timothy teaching a counselling class in Australia in 2016. (Photo: Timothy Hsi)*

### ***Back to school again for doctoral journey***

After setting up SMU Counselling Centre in 2006, Timothy headed it for the next five years. In 2011, the university received a generous donation from a philanthropist and the centre was renamed after her as the Mrs Wong Kwok Leong Student Wellness Centre.

While heading the counselling centre, he thought it would make his job easier if he could relate to faculty members as ‘peers’, as professors and teaching staff were often perceived to be ‘above’ administrators in a university. He saw getting a doctorate as a way to realise this. “My purpose was not so much to be ‘seen’ as an equal, but to facilitate a better outcome for the counselling centre and the students who seek us for help,” he explained.

In 2009 Timothy enrolled for the part-time Doctor in Education (EdD) programme that was jointly awarded by the University College London’s (UCL) Institute of Education and the National Institute of Education (NIE) at Nanyang Technological University. Besides classes at NIE, he had to attend classes for a week each in 2013 and 2014 at UCL Institute of Education, where he learnt about qualitative and quantitative research methods and their differences. He later applied his understanding of the

qualitative approach to the research for his doctoral thesis, which was on the development of professional identity of counsellors in Singapore's tertiary educational institutions.

The doctoral programme turned out to be a journey of discovery that took a little longer than expected to complete. He shared: "In order to succeed, I had to work consistently towards achieving my goal." Along the way, he had to manage his work and other commitments without losing sight of his goal. "Many doctoral students drop out because 'life gets in the way'," he added. In the process, he also discovered that he had the power of focus to achieve any goal that he set for himself. "With focus, anything is possible."

It was this focus of mind that enabled Timothy to overcome the challenge of completing a distance learning programme in two different time zones. The UK phase of his doctoral journey required him to liaise with his supervisor at the UCL Institute of Education. "The time difference meant I had to recalibrate my mind and connect her comments on the chapter submitted earlier with the next chapter," he explained. As a result of the adjustment, it took him longer than the usual three years to complete the UK phase.

Despite the difficulties encountered along the way, what had kept Timothy going on his long and arduous journey was the realisation that he needed to complete it and obtain the degree. "The EdD was for myself, my personal growth and my future," he explained. The impetus to finish it became stronger after he left SMU in 2015 as he knew that the doctorate would enhance his personal branding when he's starting his training business.

All's well that ended well when he completed the course in 2016 and graduated in 2017. This was after he founded his own consulting company in 2015, when he left SMU to advance his career as an entrepreneur in partnership with his wife.

Beyond the knowledge and skills gained from his doctoral learning journey, Timothy learnt how to think critically about any issues presented to him. He had been brought up in Singapore to follow traditions and rules, respect the views of parents, seniors and the government, and not to challenge the status quo. After completing the EdD course, he could see that many people in Singapore were living behind a "mental curtain" that's preventing them from questioning existing systems and the ways things were being done. "I have learnt to question, to challenge and to break boundaries where necessary," he shared.

### ***Learning as a professional trainer***

From 2009 to 2012, Timothy volunteered to assist the SMU Office of Human Resources in conducting coaching, talent retention, intercommunication dynamics and personal productivity workshop for the university's staff. In return, he received training as a certified training facilitator with

Development Dimensions International (DDI). He had the opportunity to learn about DDI's business-to-business model and to adopt it for his company's products years later.

Timothy also had the opportunity to provide training to:

- MOE school counsellors – he learnt how to tweak his training materials to meet their specific needs on the job and noted the importance of implementing policies effectively by having enough 'boots on the ground', otherwise they'll remain ideals that may not work in practice;
- 500 Ngee Ann Polytechnic students on goal setting through workshops, during which it dawned on him that a different set of facilitation skills was required for big classes compared to that for small classes;
- JCU staff on counselling of students;
- Kaplan English language teachers who were taught classroom management and basic helping skills through his two-day workshop – he learnt the importance of a trainer having credibility in the same field as the teachers or lecturers; and
- Nanyang Girls' High School students on developing peer support programme – he learnt from the engagement with them in 2013 and 2014 that peer support is one of the best ways to let students become passionate about something and to give them the opportunity to have an outlet to express their passion.

After starting his own training company in Singapore in 2015, Timothy was still studying for his doctorate. As luck would have it, he was given the opportunity to serve as a master instructor (as certified Global Career Development Facilitator) at the Institute for Adult Learning that year. He continued in this role until 2018. From the engagement, he learnt the importance of building a good working relationship with government and other organisations in Singapore. In 2015, he was appointed Master Facilitator for Job and Career Transition Coach (JCTC) Asia by Richard Knowdell for JCTC workshops in Singapore and Asia. He was also certified as a Facilitating Career Development instructor with the National Career Development Association in 2018. These "game-changing" opportunities allowed him to "grow deeper roots" in career development in Singapore, he shared. He has since learnt to be comfortable with people seeing him as a career 'guru' whom other practitioners would look up to.

From the above training roles, Timothy gained some invaluable insights into lifelong learning:

- Teaching offers him the opportunity to deepen his knowledge of what he's going to teach.
- To be an effective trainer, he has to continually refresh his knowledge to benefit his trainees. This has encouraged him to keep learning.
- By finding opportunities to share his learning with others, he learns more.

- Trainees and adult learners prefer knowledge that they can apply at work. Thus, it's important to understand their needs for the training to be relevant.



*As a master facilitator for Job and Career Transition Coach (JCTC) Asia since 2015, Timothy has been conducting JCTC workshops in Singapore and the region. He has realised from his sharing sessions that “knowledge must be shared with as many people as possible” as a way of paying it forward. He noted that “most experts spend much of their time sharing their knowledge, sometimes for free”. For him, learning needs to be “continuously coupled” with sharing what’s learnt with others. (Photo: Timothy Hsi)*

Lifelong learning for Timothy is about having a learning mindset, updating one’s knowledge through constant reading and sharing what one has learnt with others. As someone who confessed to having “almost no” leisure activities due to his busy schedule, it’s no wonder that what little time he has left is spent on reading self-development and enrichment books regularly.

### ***Applying what he’d learnt to benefit others as a volunteer***

Soon after obtaining his doctorate, Timothy founded the Career Development Association of Singapore (CDAS) in 2018 and has been serving as its president since. He saw CDAS as a logical next step he should take after helping to train a new generation of career practitioners. He has been teaching hundreds of them in career coaching since 2015. At the end of 2017, many of them spoke of the need for an association to represent them.

Timothy applied the findings of his doctoral thesis when he set up CDAS. For him, it was not unlike starting a business, with much work to be done in communications, logistics and determining the association’s unique selling proposition. There’s also a need to constantly discuss with CDAS council members on how to improve its services and relevance to members. Two key findings were most

relevant – building skills and knowledge, and navigating practice within current socio-political context. He explained: “Counsellors who managed to build strong professional identities were usually those who have demonstrated an interest in personal growth, spent significant amount of time to attend classes and learn new things, and continued to be curious about the developments in the field.” This finding is being reflected in CDAS’ goal of building the professional identity of career practitioners in Singapore by providing learning platforms for new knowledge to be shared constantly with members to encourage them to continue growing.

The second finding relates to the needs for practitioners to be aware of the existing social and political discourses. “There will be groups in society that will either support or oppose what counsellors are doing and the same situation exists in the political context,” Timothy explained. Hence counsellors will need to understand the socio-political context and to find ways to influence the attitude towards counselling in society by leveraging on influencers to modify mindset and thinking, he added. This finding is being reflected in CDAS’ aim of interacting readily with various government agencies to help them understand what it is trying to propagate.

After being recognised for his outstanding achievements with the Emerging Leader Award at the Asia Pacific Career Development Association’s Conference in 2017, Timothy was invited by the association’s journal editor to join its editorial board. As he wanted to immerse himself in research and hone his skills in this important area, it was “too good an opportunity to miss”. From the exposure since that year, he has learnt how journal articles are being reviewed and edited before publication.

### ***Learning outside school and work for professional and personal development***

Since his first job, Timothy has been attending short courses, workshops and conferences to update himself and to network with like-minded people. Those that had impacted his learning significantly included the workshop on the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People that he attended in 1996. This had opened his mind to new possibilities and “sharpened” his purpose in life. In 2001, during the training to be certified as a behavioural consultant (using DISC assessment tool), he saw the possibility of using the knowledge gained and tool to help people achieve their personal and professional goals.

Soon after joining SMU as a counsellor in 2003, Timothy had the opportunity to learn about peer helping at a National Peer Helping Association’s conference in the US. He found the concept to be effective and applied it when he initiated SMU Peer Helpers as a key component of the university’s counselling service. He even edited a book “A Basic Guide to Peer Helping” 10 years later at SMU. From his first book-editing experience, he learnt the importance of clarity and consistency in language usage for all the chapters submitted by different authors while making allowance for their writing style. He also learnt how to design book cover and pages on the job. “Like many of my

learning experiences, it's all about adjusting the mindset, setting the goal and consciously working towards it," he commented.

At a psychotherapy conference in the US that he attended in 2009, Timothy had the chance to interact with many counselling experts who inspired him with their techniques and narratives. "That experience was possibly one of the many factors that inspired me to start my doctoral journey," he shared. From them, he learnt about cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which is driven by the premise that individuals have faulty and irrational beliefs about themselves that cause them to behave in ways that are harmful to themselves. The narratives of the psychotherapy experts he met there showed how their life experiences had shaped their views of the world and these led to their creation of theories and approaches that were unique to them.



*Timothy was inspired by two "giants" in the field of psychology, Albert Bandura (Left) and Phil Zimbardo, who spoke at a psychotherapy conference in the US that he attended in 2009. Bandura created the social cognitive theory and the construct of self-efficacy and is famous for his 'bobo' doll experiment. From him, Timothy learnt that people basically learn from observation and that he could be a force of change through his positive behaviours to inspire people around him to live in ways that will inspire others. Zimbardo is well-known for his 'Stanford Prison Experiment' in the early 70s and is author of the book 'The Lucifer Effect'. From him, Timothy learnt that we have to be bold and speak out against institutional culture that discriminates. (Photo: Timothy Hsi)*

In 2014, Timothy's entrepreneur wife organised a three-day Job and Career Transition Coach certification workshop conducted by US career 'guru' Richard Knowdell. "This was the workshop that transformed my thinking about counselling and careers," he disclosed. It also "planted the seed" for his eventual move to start his own business in training and career services. At the workshop, he met with staff from the Institute for Adult Learning of the then Workforce Development Agency. They invited him to consider becoming a master instructor for the global career development facilitator training that they were organising.

Between 2015 and 2019, Timothy participated in the annual Asia Pacific Career Development Association's conference across Asia. There he learnt about the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in the career development field, as well as the concept of leisure as the basis for career development among youths. The underlying message was that 21<sup>st</sup> century workers need to take

charge of their own career development, as organisations will increasingly do less of this for them. Besides learning about career development practices and ideas emerging in the region at the event each year, he also connected with many leading career practitioners from across Asia. He noted the difference in mindsets between practitioners from Singapore and those from overseas.

### ***Learning to live in the moment***

Continuous learning at work or from volunteering differs from continuing education and training in school, as the former is less formal and regimented and may go beyond the knowledge and skills gained from experience, according to Timothy. For him, he has also learnt to live in the moment – enjoying it or expressing himself. “Knowing how to live in the moment is a skill that I need because I am constantly thinking about my future and my goals,” he explained. At times, his forward thinking became a problem because in his quest to strive ahead, he inevitably missed out on the present. To overcome this challenge, he has learnt mindfulness techniques to stay focused on the present and not to be overly worried about the future.

### ***Learning from sharing with others***

Timothy shared his thoughts, ideas and experiences through papers that he presented at local and overseas conferences. Doing so at no less than 10 such events between 2005 and 2018 had spurred him to continually grow his professional knowledge and expand his work exposure. He also felt the need to keep himself abreast of what’s happening and not let time slip by. He calls this “intentional living”. From other conference presenters, he learnt how to present more effectively, such as pacing of delivery, sharing of examples or anecdotes, connecting with the audience, including brief activities, dressing up the slides, use of clicker, understanding what delegates look for, use of captivating headings to attract attendees and inclusion of short videos.

During the same period (2005 to 2018), he gave talks at many organisations. From the sharing experience, he realised that short talks would need to be focused, cogent and inspiring. He noted that listeners were usually inspired by stories and personal narratives. They wanted activities to engage them, clear learning points and anecdotes that they could relate to. One approach that he has found to be effective was to “liberally sprinkle” stories during his talks to enable them to relate to the points he was bringing across.

### ***Learning from his entrepreneurial experience in Singapore***

Timothy’s plan after leaving SMU in 2015 was to relocate to Adelaide, Australia with his family. His intention was to “wrap everything up and move”. Somehow, one of his former MGC students at JCU learnt of his move and encouraged him to continue the small training business that his wife had set

up in Singapore. At that time, his wife was representing Richard Knowdell's career assessment tools as the main distributor in Asia. She had wanted to create her own business and make it a success. Being a supportive husband, he wanted to help her achieve her dream and continuing her business through a private limited company after their move to Australia was the way to go.

Thus, Abundanz Consulting Pte Ltd was set up in 2015, with Timothy as founder and his former student as director, to continue the distribution of Knowdell tools. However, business was slow for the next three years as he was travelling frequently between Australia and Singapore to conduct workshops. It started to pick up after that, as a result of "constant seeding of career ideas among participants" and his work on growing career development professionals in Singapore.

From the entrepreneurial experience, Timothy learnt that offering a core idea, service or product was fundamental to new business development. He also learnt the importance of having determination to succeed and a supportive team to handle different aspects of the business. He had his wife's dedication and support to thank for giving him the "space to write, think and ponder" during those early years. When he decided to take up the opportunity to conduct career workshops for the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), he and his family had moved to Adelaide shortly after starting Abundanz Consulting in Singapore. The IAL workshops required him to be in Singapore for 10 weeks at a stretch, which meant he was away from home for a long period. It would have been easier for him to discontinue after a few runs. However, he persisted for three years as he was determined to build up his branding and expand his influence in his field, before venturing into other career development work.

### ***Learning from his entrepreneurial experience in Australia***

In 2017, Timothy and his wife set up their own enterprise T & A Career Training and Coaching Pte Ltd in Australia to represent Knowdell career development tools there. While working in the foreign country with a different culture, he soon realised the importance of building networks and being open to making new connections. He shared: "Having a 'thick skin' is vital when working cross-culturally." He added: "Integrating with the local community is a must. While we should treasure our cultural heritage, it is critical that as immigrants, we learn to live, speak and behave like them. This, to me, is the secret to success."

### ***Learning as a fulfilling lifelong journey***

In Timothy's view, all his learning achievements were fulfilling. However, none of them could be considered as the most fulfilling as the experiences were different and he "will never arrive" on his learning journey, even after obtaining his doctorate. "There will always be other destinations on this lifelong journey," he explained. When probed further, he admitted the EdD degree was his most

fulfilling academic milestone. “Completing a doctoral programme would have been an impossible dream if I were asked about it in my 20s after struggling through school,” he shared.

Excelling in the MGC programme at JCU was “highly fulfilling” for Timothy as the results affirmed an improvement in his academic ability and his skills and competency to do well in his chosen field. At work, his achievements due to his constant learning and the acknowledgement as a knowledge leader by the career development community were just as fulfilling.

So, what does he as a self-professed late bloomer think is lifelong learning? Based on his learning experience, he views it as a “mindset of seeking constant growth, openness to challenges of old ideas and practices, and replacing them with new ones even though this may cause discomfort in the process.” Lifelong learning is also about having the courage to accept failure or the possibility of failure when embarking on something new, he added.

In addition, it was about learning to cope with difficulties, challenges and barriers thrown in his way during the learning journey. To help him overcome them, he would keep an open mind, acknowledge when he did not know and ask people, and adapt to changes by adopting new ideas and practices. To relax his mind, he would read novels and other books.

As someone who embraces new ideas, Timothy does not find the new ways of learning with the use of technology disruptive. “Learning anything new will always be challenging,” he said. When he started with online learning, he was not totally comfortable with it. However, as he recognised that it was the direction to take, he adopted it and adapted along the way. Now, technology applications like video conferencing have become basic tools for his teaching, learning and work.

Attending the workshop on the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People in 1996 had helped Timothy to find his purpose in life. His mission of enabling people to realise their potential underpins his lifelong learning pursuit. “As long as I have my goal, I speak about it, I live it, I believe it, and people will inevitably be drawn towards my path,” he explained.

For Timothy, success in lifelong learning is about integrating the new knowledge and skills acquired into his life. It is also about applying them so that he is constantly improving and growing while helping others to achieve their goals in life.

He has learnt important values from his learning journey. Besides grit, determination and sense of purpose, he came to realise that care for one’s family could be a strong motivator in pursuing higher education. “Without the goal of improving the lives of my wife and children, I probably would not have the determination to continue on my learning journey,” he explained. He added that he drew his sense of completeness and satisfaction knowing that he had done his part in providing a comfortable life for them. He knew that obtaining the doctorate would open the doors to new work opportunities.

As a “constructivist” who builds his own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflecting on them, Timothy does not view failure in the conventional way. “Failure

can be as simple as missing the bus or forgetting to return a library book on the due date,” he ventured. With a growth mindset, there is no failure per se, as he just has to take the next step in his lifelong learning journey.

### ***Benefiting from his family's support***

Learning is certainly not a lonely journey for Timothy. His biggest supporter has been his wife Amy, who's also his business partner. As a stay-home 'mompreneur', she manages the training business that Timothy started and looks after their two children. She is “very proud” of his relentless pursuit to improve himself as a psychotherapist, career strategist, educator and entrepreneur. Amy shared: “His unexpected achievements truly inspired both of us, as he was not academically inclined in school.” She had to tutor him in mathematics during secondary school. She also recalled how he had to sacrifice work and family time and to overcome frustration and discouragement during his long doctoral journey. He only had the evenings to complete his assignments. Amy, Timothy and the children would gather at the dining table to discuss his research topics. Such exchanges of ideas would influence their business direction and training courses, and these had a direct impact on her roles and responsibilities. “Many times, I had to learn along with him and to research on training topics,” she added.

Throughout Timothy's career development and learning journey, Amy was always there to support him. As their children were involved in their business discussions, his son was able to use their tools to lead discussion with his fellow national servicemen, while their daughter helped out in training preparation. She shared that work was a “huge motivator” for Timothy to pick up new knowledge and skills in adulthood, from solving IT problems and setting up a computer network (as an arts graduate) at National Youth Council to starting a counselling centre at SMU. Learning as “a necessity, a habit and a lifestyle” has become part of the family's culture, she added. She recalled that when Timothy wanted to learn new counselling intervention skills from a course in Australia, he took the whole family along as “he hated to be away from us for a long period of time”. That had meant that their two children were out of school during that time. Perhaps half in jest, Amy added that their daughter was his first patient after he learnt the new technique in managing trauma! She also cited his unexpectedly long doctoral journey as another example of his passion for learning. It was difficult for him to complete assignments on time due to his workload. “To help him focus in the evening, he would put on his Russian bomber cap. When it's on, we knew that we cannot disturb daddy,” Amy revealed.

Timothy's son Josiah and daughter Arabelle also gave him the impetus to keep going and complete his doctoral journey. He remembered them constantly asking him when the family was going to London for his graduation. Josiah thinks that a love of learning and knowledge “cannot be more evident” than through his father. As someone who has always loved to learn and discover new things, Josiah could see that many of his interests were “shaped” by his father. “It was his love of

learning that influenced my own pathway to pursue academia,” he shared. When asked to give an example of Timothy’s passion for learning, he replied: “His willingness to take risk and make a career change while furthering his academic qualifications speaks volume.” Arabelle has found her dad’s work ethic and passion for learning to be “a constant source of inspiration and motivation”. She shared: “He has always made time for me, no matter what he’s doing. His doctoral experience taught me that it’s never too late to learn something new or to pursue a new skill.” She thinks that learning is something that he cannot live without. “In everything that he experiences, sees or hears, there is something that he can learn from.” According to Arabelle, his passion for learning is often shown in how he’s always looking for new ways to learn about what interest him.

### ***Benefiting from support of others***

Timothy was motivated to continue learning and achieving by the knowledge that his friends were encouraged by his consistent drive to learn more. He still keeps in touch with his former MGC classmate and JCU colleague Shanti Achanta. She remembered the first class she took with Timothy at JCU as a student 12 years after leaving school. Although she was a novice in counselling while he was already a practising counsellor, she had found him to be a “very approachable and friendly person” who was “always willing to share his experiences and knowledge in class”. She had learnt much from the “insightful way” that Timothy initiated and participated in group discussions. “His passion for the subject and enthusiasm for learning all he could about the subject was evident,” she added. After both graduated from the MGC programme, they interacted as colleagues at JCU – she as Associate Dean (Education) and he as a part-time lecturer. “He was much sought after, well-respected and liked by the students,” she noted. She found the way he was holding a full-time job, studying for a doctorate and pursuing his passion for teaching all at the same time to be “truly inspiring”.

At JCU, his professor Dr Jill Taylor had the most impact on Timothy. He recalled: “She believed in my capability and gave me encouragement throughout the MGC journey that I would be a counsellor and a leader who could impact many counselling clients in future.” The year following his graduation, Dr Taylor invited him to teach part-time in the same MGC programme. “In spite of my not believing that I could teach, she insisted that I should try with one class and evaluate afterward,” he shared. He has not looked back since.

He also learnt much from his MGC professor Dr Peter Boman, who taught him Foundations of Counselling. Dr Boman described him as an “excellent student” who was “always engaged and diligent”. In the early stage of the course, it was “obvious” to him that Timothy wanted to learn more about people and why they behaved in certain ways. “He never saw the degree as an end point but as a starting point and this was driven by a great desire to help others,” Dr Boman added. Timothy would have private discussions with him on various topics. For example, he would ask how behavioural therapy had been used and could be used. “He would ask for extra references to read so

that he could explore the field in question even more than the subject that was being taught. This was very typical of Timothy's tittup to study." When Dr Boman met Timothy again eight years later, he was struck by the fact that "he had fulfilled the promise he showed early on, both as student and practitioner". Today, Timothy and Dr Boman are colleagues at the Australian College of Applied Psychology in Adelaide.

At NIE, Timothy found his doctoral supervisor Dr Tan Aik Ling to be "super encouraging". She was constantly sharing her perspectives as well as giving comments and suggestions. He was "very inspired" by Dr Tan who had transformed herself from a school science teacher to a NIE academic. Dr Tan had noted that Timothy was passionate about his profession as a counsellor. "He's keen to find out more about the field and how he could apply the knowledge in his work," she noted. In her view, this intrinsic motivation to make himself better than he was the previous day had served as a strong driving force for him to pursue his doctorate. She added: "Timothy was holding a comfortable position at the university and could easily just cruise through his cushy life. But he did not. And for that, he is indeed a lifelong learner," she commented. She recalled that for his EdD thesis, he would "read a great deal and wrote many drafts as he was simply not satisfied with mediocre work". She added: "We had to go back and forth many times with his drafts. His passion made me more hardworking!" She sees Timothy's experience as a good example of how learning is a journey that people can start anytime, as long as they believe in themselves.

Timothy's former employer SMU had helped to subsidise part of the MGC course fee at JCU. His boss at SMU, Dean for Students Assoc Prof Low Aik Meng (now retired) had not only encouraged him to pursue further studies but had also believed in his work. At the end of each year, the dean would always ask him: "So, what do you intend to learn this coming year and what new programmes, events or directions do you want to introduce as part of your work?" He had seen how Timothy had prepared himself for his counsellor role at SMU by enrolling in various certification programmes in facilitation, peer-helping and career development. "Timothy is a true educator at heart. He believes that by training others, he can perpetuate the process of lifelong learning and enhance its impact," he shared. "His career demonstrates his passion in teaching and learning, and in helping others learn."

Dr Ada Chung, the current Director of SMU Counselling Centre, was Timothy's deputy when he was heading the centre. He confessed that her attitude towards learning had "rubbed off" on him and kept him on his toes. In turn, she saw him as a role model for continuous learning and was inspired by his passion and vision to follow his path in continuing education and career coaching. She completed her doctoral education two years after Timothy did. "He thinks out of the box and is passionate about bringing in new ideas and knowledge, as he wants to create a positive impact and lead the field in helping it to develop and gain recognition," Ada added. "He is an engaging trainer and motivates others to continue learning."

Another former SMU colleague of Timothy is Kenneth Chan, who now heads student development at SIM Global Education. He describes Timothy as a "good friend and mentor". He's also Timothy's

former student in the MGC programme at JCU. “Whenever we meet, he has always encouraged me by sharing how inspired he was by my journey. This not only encourages me to continue, it also keeps me going as I want to continue to inspire others,” Timothy shared. Kenneth commented: “Somehow, Timothy came across to me as a person who has his career roadmap etched in his mind from day one of his existence. For instance, he would take the initiative to learn best practices from Dr Gary Sweeten, a counsellor and educator from the US who was in Singapore. He could connect the dots where learning is concerned.”

### ***Helping others as a learning outcome***

Timothy recalled that everyone in his doctoral class was encouraging each other to keep going and constantly saying, “Make sure we graduate together.”

He has since graduated beyond the pinnacle of higher education. He sees it as his job to help others to realise their full potential through constant learning and career development. He is happy to apply his learning and to ‘multiply’ himself through his work.

- Joachim Sim, author of 2018 book [\*“Learning For Life: Stories That Inspire”\*](#), which was supported by SkillsFuture Singapore