

Session 3: Media Scholarships - Possibilities & Probabilities

**Please note that the following are replies to the questions asked during the NYFA online Conference event.*

*Panelists have answered the questions in the context of the conference from their own opinions, inferences and perspectives. These responses **may not** directly represent any other entities or organisations unless otherwise stated.*

1. For the scholars, what's the difference between US and UK Film Schools compared to local unis like NTU?

Jonathan Choo: Singapore seems more foundation-based in learning. Over there it is building on what you have already learnt. But we are speaking from a perspective of a basic degree in Singapore and then a master's degree.

Low Ser En: You get a different network and exposure overseas, meet new people and learn a different way to think about your craft.

However, I would recommend having some industry experience in Singapore first (either through a film school here or having worked in the industry) as people overseas will definitely ask you to compare their industry with Singapore and you'll need to have some knowledge of your home ground! NFTS and AFI grad programmes have unique studio systems, different from other film schools.

Ivan Tan: I have had no prior film school experience in Singapore. NFTS operates in a studio system where there are eight students in every department (eight cinematographers, eight editors, eight production designers). Every year, there are eight films produced. It is a very hands-on and specialised system which I enjoyed. We also have frequent workshops from visiting directors rather than a set curriculum.

Juan Foo: Any film school experience allows the filmmaker to be in an environment of learning and practice, and depending on the school and individual, will yield different results.

The combination of personal goals and the school you attend will shape the filmmaker you become. Overseas film schools, coming at a cost, will always offer a wider perspective and range of opportunities.

National film schools, there are not many and the 'film' aspect is tucked into digital media, may offer more generality but nonetheless provide effective education to equip students. I have seen excellent students graduate from both camps.

2. After returning to Singapore, how did you step back into the film industry? Is the industry very different in terms of things like film set etiquette, etc.?

Jonathan Choo: I'm still finding my way in.

There seems like a lot of money to be made, but many of the creative industries here are very top-down and hierarchical. Creative work seems less organic and more reliant on regular concepts, hooks and pre-existing trends.

Low Ser En: There are more opportunities here, but possibilities are also limited.

As a producer, there are a lot of line operational jobs, but not much in creative and development. It is tougher to get work in London, it's more competitive.

Singapore's industry is smaller, and within a year you will be able to navigate in Singapore. Production is actually simpler in Singapore, less red tape. In the UK, you have to deal with unions, contracts, risk assessments, sign-offs and permits which can get quite complicated for student films.

Ivan Tan: When I came back I was quickly roped in to be 2nd AD for Anthony Chen's *Wet Season*.

This is quite a fortunate thing because opportunities in indie filmmaking are scarce, especially if you are a director. A director has very few hard skills to offer on a set that is not your film, so this was a great opportunity. The lack of development grants makes it tough to sustain my writing efforts.

Juan Foo: Opportunities are everywhere but you really need to network and get into the industry, fitting in as a fresh graduate without any links is a new challenge. Keep in touch with the local scene.

When you learn a form for a function, I believe it is the thought-process that is the skill. Set etiquette etc., from established industries are structured but sometimes also rigid; local practices tend to be more flexible but sometimes unrecognised as standards. It is important to gain that thought process and put it into practice but have that flexibility to adapt to the situation. Always ask peers on processes but also be aware of what you learnt overseas can be put into practice.

3. In addition to scholarships for undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, is IMDA offering shorter term scholarships for script labs/talent programs for filmmakers in Singapore?

Dorcas Tan: There are no shorter-term scholarship. Mid-term scholarships apply to full time studies and/or part time postgraduate studies in university only.

IMDA has developed the Media Manpower Plan to address the media manpower challenges and develop a future-ready workforce. The initiative includes programmes like

- 1) IMDA-BFI programmes delivering a range of training programmes and masterclasses,
- 2) ProducersLab and WritersLab with LASALLE to nurture producers, script writers and storytellers
- 3) Story Lab Apprenticeship (SLA) programme to provide fresh media professionals with structured training and opportunities to acquire key skills and competencies across in-demand job roles in the media sector

4. Is the probability of an applicant getting a scholarship higher if the applicant has already been shortlisted / accepted into their overseas Master's programme?

Dorcas Tan: Applicants do not need to be shortlisted/accepted into the course before applying for the scholarship. It does not affect the probability of obtaining the scholarship.

5. Could one apply for the scholarship at an undergraduate level and then again in a few years for a postgraduate education?

Dorcas Tan: Yes, it is possible. However, there are scholarship bond for the undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships, terms and conditions apply. Applicants may write in to info@imda.gov.sg for more information.

6. Are there any recommended film schools that offer film production eligible for the SG:D scholarship that poly graduates can pursue after completing mandatory National Service?

Juan Foo: In my opinion, there is no one size fitting all in terms of a tertiary education in film. It is very self-driven to what you want out of it. Government scholarships are unlikely to prefer one school over another. The intent should be on how the scholarship can help you with your goals to become a media talent and your potential to contribute.

If your interest is in film production, a way to research is to evaluate film schools that have more modules of production practice instead of theory; and also look at the duration of the production modules as part of the rigour of learning the craft. Another way is to research the lecturers and professors in the school and look at their scope of experience.

7. On the one hand, people like Jonathan have loads of film education while people like Ivan didn't study Film. Is studying a Film (as a Fine Arts degree) absolutely necessary to succeed in the media industry?

Jonathan Choo: No, self-learning is also a way but it is about discipline and the time to learn.

Low Ser En: Film school is a 'way' to get into the community, but it's not the only way.

The biggest takeaway from film school is that you can make friends with your peers who will be your collaborators in the future.

School is also a good environment to learn and make mistakes without the pressure of losing your job.

Ivan Tan: Strictly speaking - no. You don't need film school to make films. But to be an independent filmmaker, you need to protect your mind and your stories.

It is easy to get swayed into the commercial sphere and get distracted from the films you really want to make.

Film school offered me that protection for three years and made me aware of possibilities within myself that I would not have realised if I stayed in Singapore.

Juan Foo: To practice and appreciate film, perhaps a film school will give you the time, space and focus to do so. But there are also many film school graduates that do not become practitioners.

School or not, if you 'practice' film as a career or art, surely, you need to have some cultivation of taste and craft. That can be done in school, or in your daily life - watching, reading films, working on films, writing, discussing film etc.

8. Where are the scholars now with their craft and career?

Jonathan Choo: Writing and taking paid jobs.

Low Ser En: Writing, reading scripts from other directors, and trying to start my own company.

Ivan Tan: Writing a short film and developing my feature since COVID-19.

I am actively turning down commercial jobs because I don't want to be distracted from my own film work.

Dorcas Tan: The scholarship is one stepping-stone into the media industry, and those who gained success are those who do not stop learning and strive constantly to hone the craft themselves. Our scholars have done Singapore proud, with their works screened in various film festivals and bagged awards in Cannes, Sundance Film Festival and more.

9. Where did you work/are bonded to? What was the experience working in those companies?

Ser En Low: I was bonded to MM2. It was great that I had a job right after graduation, that helped me re-assimilate into the local industry.

I learnt a lot and I had the opportunity to work on films such as *Zombiepura*, *Circle Line* and a TV series. I was constantly wanting to learn more, and I really wanted to learn more about business and entrepreneurship.

I found an entrepreneurial programme and was accepted into it. It was a full-time course so I made a decision to concentrate on it, which was why I left the company.

10. There are many that say you do not need film school to make it in the film industry. Is it worth it to continue pursuing film studies post-grad? How does it compare with immediately going for working experience in the industry?

Jonathan Choo: There is some name to it - to come back with a masters and a film award.

If you want to start from below and work your way up, it may honestly be tougher. If you are a filmmaker, you need to find a way to make your own films.

Low Ser En: The added training in post-grad is definitely useful.

I think it depends on your ambition. Any overseas training is 'away' from the industry. But the overseas exposure is invaluable for any filmmaker.

Ivan Tan: You don't need film school to make films. I think many young filmmakers need to think about how to grow as a filmmaker.

Read a lot of fiction and dissect the stories that you love. Understand how storytelling and storytelling in cinema works.

Set experience is necessary but you need to be near a camera (within 10m) to understand how films are being made.

So instead of just being a PA, I became a stills photographer for film sets because it allowed me to be close to the camera. I helped out on many film sets over four years and saw what worked and what didn't work. This helped me shape the kind of film sets I wanted to create for myself and my team.

Juan Foo: School or not, if you 'practice' film as a career or art, surely, you need to have some cultivation of taste and craft. That can be done in school, or in your daily life - watching, reading films, working on films, writing, discussing film etc.

If you want to do film post-grad just to practice film, perhaps working a few years in the industry is more effective for you to really decide if film is what you want to do; and then consider (money, time etc) if a post-grad film education is really needed. And when exposed to film work, you may also realise what craft draws you in more - camera, art, design, writing, editing, marketing, etc.

You don't need to only be a film director in the entire film ecosystem.

11. Were there opportunities to stay and work in the UK after the course? Was this a restriction for the scholarship; does it require you to come back to work in Singapore?

Jonathan Choo: No restriction but I didn't see any way I could stay and remain due to the administrative and immigration. I also felt there were no opportunities there for me.

Low Ser En: I had to come back for the bond.

Ivan Tan: There was no restriction. The only way to stay there was to get married due to visa restrictions.

Don't rush to go into post-grad. I felt I was not ready for the opportunities that were presented to me.

12. Where do you get the inspiration to tell your stories? How do you decide what stories you want to tell?

Jonathan Choo: You can be inspired by anything. More importantly, it is how you habitually allow yourself to think because it helps you filter and digest your inspiration. And this is how perhaps film schools help. They help you rewire your thinking patterns and systems to digest inspiration.

Writing, drafting, thinking about stories are needed for a filmmaker - you need to be personally invested into how you want to tell the story with a 100% unadulterated focus.

Low Ser En: I am inspired by real-life stories and situations. Am I moved by the story and can I retell the story to other people? Can I get a good sense of how others react to the story as I retell it?

As a producer, I am also inspired by the director's intensity and their conviction to tell their story, and with that, I am also equally if not more inspired to bring it to the screen.

Ivan Tan: The most common form of inspiration for me is an image in my head that's stuck in my head. The only way for me to get rid of the image is to write a story for it.

I also dig into my childhood and teenage years to see if there are incidents that don't make sense to me. When there is a gap between what you are told to feel and what you feel, there is usually a story inside. I decide if I want to tell a story based on the conviction I have for it.

Writing is a process of building your conviction for a story. As you revise your drafts, you either lose or build your conviction. Work as fast as you possibly can. Keep it urgent.

13. Will you consider yourself to have succeeded in the industry?

Jonathan Choo: What is your definition of success? To me, when I get to work on something I believe in, and that I see it through, I would say that to me is 'success'.

if it is about climbing the corporate ladder, you will lose your heart. Being successful to filmmakers is to see through your work with your heart and allow others to share it.

Low Ser En: What is success in filmmaking? Is it about leaving a legacy behind or making lots of money? That's what I used to think, but at this stage of my life, I realised you cannot structure your life based on what society defines as 'success', and you need to define it for yourself - what makes you happy.

Being successful to me now is having freedom. Freedom is especially important for artists - the freedom to be able to make your art, and tell whatever story you want. It could be financial

freedom that leads to this artistic freedom. Or, having a strong body of work to have enough trust with your commissioners or investors that gives you this artistic freedom.

In any case, work towards what keeps your passion alive and you get to keep doing what you love to do. That is success to me.

Ivan Tan: In the past, I thought that it was all about 'success' in the festival circuit. Now, I realise I have to redefine the idea of success because it is too narrow and my work has to have more meaning than just festivals.

Filmmaking is a way for me to live as intensely as possible. It is also a form of responsibility to the circumstances that have allowed me to continue to make films.

As long as I am able to dedicate myself to telling honest, meaningful stories that have relevance to people, then I have succeeded.