SOSS students are versatile and innovative. They receive well-rounded education that combines theory and practice with academic rigor. This special edition features SOSS students’ participation in various events and activities. From there, they learned to appreciate and understand the complexity of contemporary societies, and are better equipped to become thought leaders of the future.

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SOSS Gives Back 2015 19
In celebration of our nation’s Golden Jubilee, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) jointly organised the SG50+ Conference that was held on the 2nd and 3rd of July at the Shangri-La Hotel. The Conference was titled “Singapore at 50: What lies ahead?” and it sought to be a celebration of ideas on how our city-state might continue to survive and thrive in the next 50 years.

The conference aimed to critically reflect on four key issues that were likely to shape Singapore’s future in the next half-century: geopolitics in an increasingly complex and multipolar world order; economic development in the face of rapid technological advances; building a future-ready city and evolving our system of governance to meet the increasing demands of a more pluralistic and diverse population. The attendance of many eminent thought leaders from Singapore and overseas made for a highly thought-provoking and inspiring session about the prospects of our island nation.

The conference was open by a conversation with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong led by Dr Fareed Zakaria, renowned host of CNN’s Fareed Zakaria GPS and columnist at The Washington Post. PM Lee spoke about governance in Singapore and how the preservation of religious harmony must be a continuous effort. On why Singapore has not transitioned politically the way that other countries with successful economies but little resources have, PM Lee cited the government of the day’s approach of devising policies which help the majority of the population. This differs considerably from the system in countries such as the US, where political parties maintain vested interests in particular sectors. In response to Zakaria’s question on whether racial and religious problems have been solved, PM Lee replied in the negative, and explained that the prominence of religion, the spread of religious terrorism and the proliferation of social media all posed great challenges ahead.
My personal favourite was the first session on geopolitics and Singapore’s position in a multipolar world order. Ambassador-at-large, Bilahari Kausikan, delivered a riveting segment about the evolving world order and the potential hurdles Singapore could face in calculating and pursuing her interests in a changing global climate. He said “incoherence” in the current world order did not imply a situation of multipolarity, and that a true world power would be one that was able to bring coherence to international relations. On the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, he noted that aspiration was not equivalent to capability, and was of the view that these five states would develop to be, at best, regional powers. Ambassador Kausikan provided a refreshing take on the state of international relations today. His framing of today’s evolving world order provided much clarity to the oft-discussed issue and he shunned overly sanguine perceptions about the development of BRICS nations.

Ambassador Kausikan noted that Singapore would have to respond to changes in international relations in a nuanced manner. He added that possible limitations to this move would be largely domestic. Firstly, partisan domestic politics could contaminate foreign policy and secondly, increasing opportunities for foreign influence warranted the need for a more educated public. The second point brings to mind issues such as foreign criticism of our domestic policies (e.g. the death penalty and limitations on the freedom of speech etc.) and Singaporeans’ responses to such criticism. Without sufficient understanding of the basis of our policies, we could be easily swayed by the arguments of those who portray themselves as the higher moral authority. On a separate level, being resistant to foreign influence also reflects a degree of self-assurance about where we stand as a nation today.

All in all, the SG50+ conference was a great experience, which offered a meaningful reflection of Singapore’s past and offered much food for thought about our future.
As the school term ended and summer break began, eight students hailing from various schools in SMU remained hard at work, going to the library to photocopy readings and work on assignments. Not that we minded, for it was only a few weeks before our joint policy task force with the University of Southern California would officially begin! Led by our dean, Professor James Tang, this course would take us right to the heart of U.S foreign policy – Washington, where we would exchange views with and glean fresh insights from policymakers, think tanks, and other experts in the field. This joint task force would also involve expert interviews and discussions held in Singapore, and culminate in a presentation to the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

Fast forward to 12 May, and we found ourselves in the function room of the George Washington University Inn. It was to be our first meeting with our USC counterparts – previous encounters had happened over webcam and we were all eager to meet face-to-face. We were briefed on our itinerary and before long, we were boarding the metro, headed to our first destination.

The next few days were nothing short of an eye opening and enriching experience. The 22 students (accompanied by our ever helpful professors) visited places like the Pentagon, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the World Bank to learn and hear from experts, attaining a more informed view of the U.S’s relations with China and the rest of the world. A highlight of the Washington leg for me was being able to visit the Singapore embassy, where we were able to not just engage in academic banter but also sample Singaporean snacks like pandan cake and pineapple tarts. Talk about a taste of home!

Discussions at the Brookings Institute... To be continued next page
All too soon, our days in Washington came to an end. We packed our bags and hopped onto a flight that would take us to the west coast. We landed in Los Angeles and headed straight to our apartments that were a stone’s throw away from the USC campus. For this leg of the trip, we were tasked to consolidate our interviews and begin conceptualizing our final report. It is now worth mentioning that the USC campus was simply beautiful, with its numerous heritage site-worthy buildings. A vibrant student community, even in the summer, made our short time there especially enjoyable.

Before we knew it, it was time to head back to hot and humid Singapore. The American students were clearly excited at this prospect, most of them having never visited our little red dot before. Upon touching down, we were given a few days to rest before heading up north to Kuala Lumpur for the 29th Asia Pacific Roundtable. Featuring academics, think tanks and non-governmental organisation and representatives, the two-day conference was packed with great insights by the discussants and participants. Back to Singapore, where the final leg of the task force beckoned.

Amidst the numerous interviews and discussions, the SMU students got the privilege of hosting the Americans and inducting them into our local culture. Hawker food, check. Sentosa, check. Chinatown, check. Even more hawker food, check! Even as their ‘tour guides’, I found it great that we got to learn more about our own culture, and appreciate the things in Singapore that we seldom pay attention to (like cheap and good food being readily available at most times of the day, and how convenient travelling between places is).
As the course drew closer to its end, the work got more intense. Hours were spent holed up in school, analyzing the interviews, working on our group papers, and touching up on our presentations. It was during the last few days that the spirit of solidarity and teamwork really emerged, as teams worked tirelessly to not just finish their parts, but also help out the others where needed. And even though not everyone would get a chance to present, the non-presenters chipped in to make the presentation watertight, from the slides to the presentation content to even the way the presenters spoke and stood!

All good things eventually come to an end, and the 12th of June marked the conclusion of the joint task force, exactly a month after we had started. As we submitted our final report, there was definitely joy and relief; it had been an intense month. At the same time, a sense of heaviness filled the air as it became clear that the wonderful partnerships and friendships that had grown steadily over the last four weeks was about to come to an end.

Was it a good way to spend a month of summer break? I definitely had my reservations about the workload. Make no mistake, it was an intensive course, both physically and mentally draining. However, the lessons learnt, the memories made and friendships forged made all the hard work worth it. Armed with a better understanding of the world, and Singapore’s place on the global stage, I can now better appreciate the peace this country enjoys, and not to take it for granted. My fellow course mates would agree, I’m sure.
In January and February earlier this year, seven students in SOSS embarked on a journey with Visiting Professor Paul Evans in the annual workshop for International and Asian Studies major. Titled “Singapore’s Foreign Policy: Practitioner Perspectives”, the six-week workshop featured speakers including President S R Nathan, Ambassador-at-Large and SMU Senior Fellow Bilahari Kausikan, and Ambassador Barry Desker.

The workshops featured discussions on Singapore’s foreign policy origins, before moving on to other subjects such as Singapore’s position in ASEAN, and relations with other countries, before culminating in a discussion forum with former President S R Nathan where participants discussed the future of Singapore.

It was a rare opportunity for students to engage with senior public figures with such intimacy, and they did not let the chance go by. They engaged with the speakers on questions on morality within foreign policy and on national security and intelligence. The small size of the workshop also meant that students could easily follow up with further questions to probe the speakers, which they did so to great effect. The workshop was also open to the wider SMU community and members of the public, and they provided different views, and posed different questions to the speakers, greatly adding to the value of the workshop.

The workshop highlighted a facet of politics oft not taught in classrooms, namely the machinations of diplomacy. The International Relations student would often be taught the key theories, and how they are applicable in describing relationships between countries. What is lost is looking at foreign policy and international relations through the eyes of the people who are involved in foreign policy creation and implementation, where their views are sometimes different from academic considerations. Furthermore, the workshop further highlighted the need to consider foreign policy as part of holistic policymaking, and not as a disjoint, separate issue from economic policy, or social policy.
Top: (Fourth and fifth from the left) **Ambassador Barry Desker** (Distinguished Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University and Non-Resident Ambassador of Singapore to the Holy See and Spain, and Chairman of Singapore Technologies Marine) and **Professor Paul Evans** (Moderator of the IAS Workshops and Visiting Professor in International and Asian Studies in School of Social Sciences, SMU).

Bottom: (Front row, fourth from the left) **Mr S.R. Nathan** (Distinguished Senior Fellow, School of Social Sciences. SMU).
When I was a freshman, one of the things I was most excited for was orientation camps. This summer, SMU School of Social Sciences held its annual Freshman Orientation Camp from the 10th – 12th of August.

The theme of the camp was Enigma, and in line with the theme, the three day programme had an overlying mystery that groups would have to try to unravel. It is the first time that a point system was not used to calculate the best group, but instead, the group that could solve the mystery most efficiently would win the best group.

This new installment was fresh, exciting and well-received by the freshmen. Many freshmen found more purpose in playing the games, and even the fright night contained valuable clues that would help groups solve the mystery.

Each group was given a cluedo sheet and they had to strike out all the incorrect clues on the sheet in order to find the right answer to the mystery. On the first day of camp, groups played station games around school. The games aimed to build the team synergy within the group and to help them get to know one another better.
The second day was spent at Sentosa, where teams played competitive beach games against one another. It was a fun-filled afternoon where freshmen rolled in the sand and got drenched in the sea. Smiles and laughter were exchanged. All in all, groups not only bonded amongst themselves but also with other groups.

The third day was a tribute to our nation where teams were tested on their knowledge about Singapore through an Amazing Race around the Dhoby Ghaut, City Hall and Boat Quay area. The stations involved tasks such as memorising the plaque of Sir Stamford Raffles, taking photographs of different landmarks and solving puzzles. Groups had to complete as many stations as possible so as to obtain as many clues as possible to solve the mystery.

The camp was definitely a change of perspective for most, and it served as a good representation of the School of Social Science. SOSS takes pride in providing a different experience as compared to the other five schools in SMU. The faculty is small, but close-knit, similar to a family. One of the aims of the camp was to help freshmen find friends that would potentially support them throughout their next four years in SMU.

In a nutshell, Enigma 2015 was a success, not only in terms of fun, but also in helping freshmen forge new friendships, and starting their first term of school on the right note.
Overseas Exchange @ Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

By Claire Ooi, BSocSc Yr 4

Gullible’s travels: why I don’t have post-exchange blues

My spring exchange was at the Copenhagen Business School, although that would give the impression that I spent all my time in Copenhagen. In truth, almost every other week was spent exploring European cities and countryside. Learning is for life, and not just for work! I benefited from choosing not just a university in a major city, but also one with very good connectivity by airport and metro, and fully exploited that advantage.

I was eager to travel, even alone! Amidst all the splendid locations, I must admit these would have been more enjoyable on separate holidays in between Singaporean drudgery. My attempts to live like a local had the effect of making me “used to” breathtaking architecture. Just like the locals, it was easy to take things for granted. For example, hardly any Parisians seemed to appreciate the Eiffel Tower.

Before this exchange, I had wondered why other students ever came to Singapore – no great mountains, beaches, forests or jaw-dropping cathedrals, and it’s always so hot. But after spending six months away from “nothing”, I missed it! I had taken for granted the Singaporean cuisine, the familiarity of Singlish, and just hanging out in the city with friends and family. In Brussels, I walked into a restaurant asking for a “table for one”! Indeed, as Marcel Proust said, “the true journey of discovery does not consist of searching for new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”
But more about my home away from home. As a natural homebody, I quickly settled into Copenhagen. This city, like Singapore, does not have a very impressive tourist attraction. Its most famous is the Little Mermaid, with emphasis on “Little”. In fact, it’s much smaller than our Merlion. The cosmopolitan centre however is not defined by its tourist attractions. I enjoyed many an afternoon just cycling the same streets and ducking into random cafés to have tea.

I purchased a second-hand bicycle to experience first-hand the cycling culture of the West. The coexistence of bicycles with pedestrians and cars is impressive, a problem which we have yet to iron out in Singapore. The “Copenhagen Left” is a nifty trick for safe cycling, whereby cyclists are always on the rightmost lane even when they are turning left (Denmark has right-hand traffic). Because cycling is so convenient and cheap, the state of their bicycle parking is as bad as that of our Singaporean cars!
Before I left Singapore, I had doubts about going overseas for such an extended period of time. My friends encouraged me, saying that I would “catch the wanderlust bug”. During the exchange, that kind of wanderlust eluded me as I grew tired of jetting around Europe – I obtained far more enjoyment from lazy Sundays cycling around Copenhagen.

Then I looked up the actual meaning of wanderlust and realized that it means the enjoyment of roaming or strolling. It suddenly occurred to me that I had indeed caught the bug. I now intend to roam around Singapore and explore the spice of life. Singapore is a beautiful city with offerings comparable to many of the largest European ones, and I’m glad that it is my home! I finally understand what G. K. Chesterton meant when he said, “the whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one’s own country as a foreign land.”
On January 4th 2015, I embarked on my exchange to France filled with excitement and enthusiasm. After all, the rich culture and history of Europe enthralled me, making it a dream of mine to someday be able to tour the continent. After much research, I found France to be the perfect location for my exchange. The cost of living in France was relatively cheaper compared to other countries in the European Union (EU). The weather was pleasant and cool, and travelling out of France was inexpensive due to the efficient train systems and low cost carriers (Ryanair, Easyjet, Vueling etc.).

My host university was NEOMA Business school, located in a sleepy town called Rouen, in the state of Normandy - a one and a half hour train ride from Paris. For those who might find the place familiar, Normandy is where the largest seaborne invasion in history took place; during WW2, and with the landing operations on 6 June 1944 termed “D-Day”.

View of the residence taken from my window. The sun sets around 9.30-10.30pm in early spring. Picture taken in June (Spring) at 9.45pm.
Nothing could ever prepare me for what I experienced here. For a start, the weather was excruciatingly cold. My first night made me regret wondering why there were no fans or cooling units in the room, but just a nondescript radiator. Temperatures in Rouen during winter averaged 0°C to 6°C, with the nights hitting sub-zero. Even with my down-feather jacket, scarf, gloves, thermal undershirts and pants, my body was just not ready for the weather. Each night, I braced myself for the enduring cold, thankful for the radiator in my room. Most mornings, I awoke to frost on my window glass, while on other days, to the exquisite sight of crystallized water droplets melting on the grass.

Language barriers were another issue here. Having heard how the French were rather resistant to speak any language than their own, I prepared myself by enrolling into a basic French class offered by SMU ICON's Francophile. Despite this, my limited ability to speak French proved futile when trying to communicate with the locals, who understood little or no English at all. Instead, I relied on a Google Translate Application on my iPhone, and showed it to the locals when they could not understand what I was saying.

Travelling around Europe was awesome. The cities were magnificent, the food was great and the people were friendly. I recall having dinner one night in Bruges (city in Belgium) when the table next to me started striking up a conversation while waiting for their food to arrive. I guess they were very much intrigued to see two Asian guys sitting in a restaurant full of Caucasians. They bought my friend and I drinks, and we left the restaurant after dinner having made two new Belgium friends.

I loved the classes here. They were entirely different from the teaching styles I had been exposed to in Singapore. My favorite definitely has to be my class on cross cultural issues and global diversity, where my professor (a French of Spanish descent) would teach in novel and engaging ways. For example, during the lesson on creativity, he had us snap our fingers to the rhythm of jazz music, while randomly pulling up students to dance and feel the beat. Another time, he separated the Caucasian and Asian students into two groups, and asked each group to identify the nationalities of the other group. He then explained how most stereotype threats exists simple because we cannot identify differences between groups we are unfamiliar with.
Advice for my fellow SOSS students

Having survived six months here in Europe, here are some tips I can offer to fellow SOSS students to make your stay more enjoyable:

1) Do your homework. Don’t base your budget solely on the cost of living in your desired country of exchange. While there were other countries in Europe that were significantly cheaper compared to France, I discovered that the cost to travel out from those countries were exorbitant. For instance, groceries and rent is notably cheaper in Poland, but each flight out to a neighboring country cost approximately 120 euros, as compared to 30 – 40 euros in France.

2) Check the local news and class timetable regularly. It is a nightmare to travel somewhere, only to discover that your mode of transport has been rescheduled due to strikes. It seems that in Europe, the freedom to demonstrate is more important than the inconvenience posed to others. Experiencing this has made me much more appreciative of Singapore’s zero tolerance for strikes.

3) Prepare a list of activities to occupy your time. If you happen to be unfortunate (or fortunate) enough to stay in the countryside where shops close early and there’s nothing much to do except hike in the forests nearby, then you’re better off preparing things to kill your time. I would recommend creating a long list of TV shows you’ve always wanted to watch, but never had the time.

In retrospect, apart from the unforgettable experiences and countless friends you will make, I believe that going on exchange is akin to a journey of self-discovery. Nowhere else can you be one with yourself. For that moment in time, free from exam woes and project deadlines. Alas, go where your heart desires, and do not be afraid to chart your own adventure!

My cross cultural issues and global diversity professor and his friend hosting us in his hometown, Barcelona. Notice his twin brother to the far right? Both of them teach in Neoma Business School, are almost impossible to tell apart if not for the spectacles.

Downtown Rouen. Main shopping district of the city. Shops close really early though. The place is dead quiet by 8.30pm.
My exchange to University of Florida was exciting and a memorable experience as an SMU student. In this article I wish not to repeat the benefits of the international exchange programme, but to recount the process and maybe highlight several points to consider for a fruitful semester abroad.

For the start, I had aimed for the exchange experience to be mainly for my studies and not mainly for travelling. I’ve put down five choices, which I think are obtainable and offer the greatest number of courses that I can match back to SMU for credit. I was chosen for University of Florida. The preparation for the exchange would take some time, and in my experience, the more prepared you are, the better your experience will be. The most important items are official documents. This includes immigration papers (especially for the US), official letter from your programme, health insurance and accommodation. Next in line are the courses you will take. Take time to look at your exchange school’s courses offering and communicate with your department at SMU to make sure they are transferable. Also review carefully if you can or cannot register for certain courses. Finally, prepare your luggage.

Walking along the street leading to Lake Alice
At my friend’s house
I settled in with my new life quickly and did not encounter any significant challenges. Sorting out all the documents and getting used to the teaching and administrative system of the school took about one week. As I was the only SMU exchange student, I had to rely on the school staff and new friends, both local and exchange students from other institutions. This was difficult at first, since I don’t know many people, but it got easier as I engaged with the very friendly staff and my new classmates.

Among the things I’ve learned on my exchange, the knowledge I’ve gained from the courses I took should be first mentioned. Two most important ones were “Intermediate French” and “Race and Racism”, both are not available at SMU. While the first sharpened my French skills, the latter presented a chance to learn more about the country I was in. Furthermore, while the content of the courses is important, to be able to observe education conducted in a different manner and culture was very interesting. My classes are not bell-curved, while interaction in class was very lively. Finally, I feel compelled to highlight the vast intellectual resources at University of Florida. A big university with a wide variety of majors, its library contains an enormous collection of not just professional books and academic journals but also literature and poetry with works from ancient history to contemporary.

Of course the learning also occurred outside the classroom. While I did not travel much (only on holidays to visit my friends), I was compensated with an understanding of what it is like to live in America. Having American flatmates helped. Participate in their everyday life (work, school, play, and even occasional mischiefs) gave me a uniquely American feel. Essentially, I experienced “being” American. Overall, my perspective has broadened immensely (especially important for a sociologist major like me) during the four months in Florida.

Overall, if there is one most important thing I have learnt during my exchange to University of Florida, I would say that it is being able to see myself as a local. Whichever school you may choose, take advantage of its resources, its people, create a deep tie with it so that when you leave, you feel like it has become part of you.
On 1 August 2015, 16 graduates from the SMU SOSS graduates from Class of 2015 proudly donned their emerald green SOSS tees and set forth on an ambitious goal - to distribute 100 boxes of LEGO sets to 100 low-income families with young children living in the Jalan Kukoh and Bukit Merah rental flat districts. However, it was more than a simple LEGO distribution. The SOSS volunteers were equipped with evidence-based infographics summarizing the latest findings from child development research on how these families could utilise these LEGO sets to promote cognitive development in their children. Their goal was to narrow the neural disparities faced by vulnerable children from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families that emerges at a young age.

It started with an idea by Jonathan Tan, an SOSS alumni from Class of 2015, to pioneer an innovative solution to help vulnerable children from lower SES families develop their developmental potential further at an early age. He recognised that these children lacked opportunities to play with educational toys (e.g. LEGO) as compared to their higher SES peers and wanted to meet their needs. Also, he sought to rally his peers together one final time to give back to society as a graduating cohort. In his valedictorian speech, he urged his peers to make community service a way of life and followed up by sponsoring the project with the monetary award that he received. He hoped that future graduating cohorts would carry on the tradition and organise their own community service projects as well.
The project was a major success as the volunteers managed to reach out to a total of 11 blocks of rental flats and distributed these toys to 100 families. Many children waited eagerly outside their houses as the volunteers carried the brightly coloured LEGO sets to them. They squealed with joy as soon as they laid their hands on the toys. Many parents were deeply touched by the kind gestures of the volunteers. One mother had mentioned how grateful she was as her child could only play LEGO at his pre-school and could not bring it home to play at night.

Many of volunteers themselves were impacted through their interactions with the children. “The world feels a little nicer…giving is indeed more than taking,” remarked Desmond Ang. Others recognised that giving back as a cohort could be implemented in a simple, yet effective manner. “Giving back to the community can be as simple as having an idea and coming together with your friends to make it happen,” shared Fiona Lim (as pictured on the right).

Moving forward, the team seeks to pass the baton on to the SOSS Graduating Class of 2016 and is excited to see how they can keep the tradition going.