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## **A Teacher at Heart**

"I have always wanted to help educate the younger ones," says Ministry of Education scholar Chen Zhongyi.

By Jason Hahn

It is a rare person who seems to have it all figured out when he is only 22 years old, but this is the impression one gets when talking to Mr Chen Zhongyi.

Currently a sophomore at Imperial College in the United Kingdom where he is reading physics, the education merit scholar is nurturing his natural inquisitiveness to become an educator.

From an early age, Mr Chen knew he wanted to be a teacher.

"I am pretty sure that, growing up, everyone has a list of aspirations – 'What I want to be when I grow up'. Mine was quite short, and being a teacher always topped that list"

In his secondary school days at Raffles Institution, where he was deputy head prefect, and later at Raffles Junior College, his calling was moulded and given shape by his teachers. He credits his judo coaches and school teachers for inspiring him to walk the same path.

His interest in mathematics and physics came a little later when he did these subjects for his A levels.

"That was when I started to appreciate the importance of subjects, especially mathematics. Initially, I was pretty bad at physics, and the concepts never came to me naturally. But the patience and guidance of my physics teachers influenced me a great deal."

The attitude of his teachers – their dedication and obvious love for their subjects – only had the effect of reinforcing his decision to pursue his career choice.

Indeed, his certainty about what he wanted to be when he grew up meant that applying for a scholarship with the Ministry of Education (MOE) was a given.

"Besides, I could use this opportunity, not just simply to dig deeper into a particular subject, but to also study and learn the culture of other people in a foreign country," he says.

“The MOE overseas scholarship gave me this very opportunity to study in London and learn something new.”

And learning something new has been something Mr Chen experiences almost on a daily basis.

Very early in his freshman year, he realized that learning extends beyond books and exams.

“Being away from my family has trained and forced me to be more independent. It is a balance between embracing freedom and being disciplined at the same time,” he says.

He describes the three-year degree course at Imperial College as a challenging one. In particular, he notes that the academic mentality of the British education system is more research-oriented.

His current course examines the diverse applications of quantum mechanics to the real world.

He says: “The course is by no means easy, but the bigger challenge, the greater the sense of satisfaction if one manages to thrive well in such a course.”

“Actually, people here in the physics department are so inquisitive that they have no time to stop and think about the difficulty of the course.”

Upon the completion of his degree, he intends to first gain a few years of teaching experience.

“I will have to undergo a diploma course in education immediately after my degree in 2008. After that, I will probably start teaching in a secondary school.”

If all goes according to plan, this will be followed by stints in various departments in the MOE headquarters.

“With this experience, I believe that I will be in a better position to do a master’s in education leadership, hopefully in Teachers College, Columbia University,” he says.

In no small part, this career path reflects his keenly felt sense of debt to Singapore.

“I feel privileged to have received so many years of good education in Singapore. In one way or another, one should always repay society for this favour, and I choose to teach.”

“All of us take on various roles in society, and I have always wanted to help educate the younger ones.”

“Whether or not I continue to teach in schools or work in the MOE headquarters will depend on a lot of factors, but I will always see myself as an educator, and this will not change.”