‘More authentic, personal’ with Yale-NUS online graduation

College to be first among local universities to hold virtual ceremony after pandemic derails traditional plans

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Mr Scott Lee Chua was set to deliver a speech on stage on behalf of the Class of 2020 at their Yale-NUS College graduation ceremony this month.

Instead, his batchmates will now listen to his speech as part of an hour-long virtual ceremony planned for tomorrow.

The coronavirus pandemic has derailed plans for the 250 graduates’ graduation ceremony – which was to be held at the University Cultural Centre at the National University of Singapore (NUS) next Tuesday – just as it has for many such ceremonies globally.

So Yale-NUS, an autonomous college of NUS, has decided to push through an online version of the occasion Monday.

It will be the first among the local universities to hold a graduation ceremony online. NUS has postponed its ceremonies until January next year, while Singapore Management University intends to have a virtual commencement too.

The Yale-NUS ceremony, which has been pre-recorded, will include speeches from its president Tan Tai Yong and Education Minister Ong Ye Kung.

Around 42 per cent of the graduates are international students and the rest are Singaporeans. About 60 per cent of the international students are staying on campus, while the rest have released off campus or returned to their home countries since early last month, Mr Chua, 23, a Filipino student who majored in economics, said: “No one really chooses to graduate in a pandemic, but what we can choose are our mindset.”

One silver lining with the online session is having less distance between speakers and the audience, he said, as his batchmates will be watching him from close up through their own screens.

“I am less afraid to be a bit more authentic and personal,” he added.

Using a camera, with a shelf as a makeshift tripod, he recorded himself making his five-minute speech in his dormitory room as the Yale-NUS campus. He dressed up – all the way down to his shoes – to give himself “the right frame of mind”.

He even inserted some temporary adhesive at the sides of his spectacles so they would stay in a position with the least glare from the light.

“Initially, the speech was more about the past few years. But as the context changed, it had to acknowledge the situation, looking towards the future and remaining positive,” said Mr Chua, who will be taking a master’s programme in quantitative economics at NUS in August.

Mr Alpesh Bhatt, Yale-NUS College’s associate dean of alumni affairs and strategic events, added: “We wanted to give the people giving the speeches to have high-quality recordings, but with the current breaker, they had to record themselves at their own pace.

“The end result is very raw, the quality is inconsistent. But it’s also nice to see the differences.”

She said the planning committee of 12 staff members tried to remain as many traditional ceremonial elements as possible. For instance, they managed to get a video recording of Madam Koo Koon, the chair of the college’s governing board, opening and closing the ceremony as the provost officer. She was also the provost officer in 2016.

Dr Trisha Craig, vice-president (engagement) of Yale-NUS College, said: “There’s formality and intensity at the same time. Typically, the minute would be far away on stage, but now it feels like he’s having a conversation with you.”

The online session will also show individual photographs of the graduates as the college’s two rectors read out their names.

Mr Leo Ng, 26, who is graduating with a double degree in law and liberal arts from Yale-NUS and NUS, said: “Initially, I didn’t think the ceremony was very important, but after it was taken away, it felt like there was something missing. Having the digital graduation allows some sort of closure for us to move along from this undergraduate journey.”