

## Teaching Connections Podcast

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**Episode** 7

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**Title:** Understanding Promotion Pathways in NUS:  
A Conversation with NUS Vice Provost (Academic  
Affairs) Professor Tulika Mitra

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In this episode, Vice Provost (Academic Affairs) Professor Tulika Mitra shares with us the various promotion pathways for academics in NUS.

This episode is chaired by Assoc Prof Soo Yuen Jien, Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

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## 0 **Intro Music & Voiceover**

“You are listening to the Teaching Connections podcast, brought to you by the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, CDTL, National University of Singapore. Teaching Connections is an online teaching and learning space that aims to advance discussions and share effective practices and ideas related to higher education.”

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## 1 **Welcome/ Intro (00:26):**

Soo Yuen Jien (SYJ): “Hello everyone, I am Soo Yuen Jien, Director of the CDTL, Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning.

In this episode, we learn more about the various promotion pathways for academics at NUS. We are very privileged to have Vice Provost (Academic Affairs) and Provost's Chair Professor of Computer Science, Professor Tulika Mitra to share more about these initiatives at NUS and how these initiatives can support colleagues in their teaching and learning.

Hello Tulika, and thank you very much for joining us today.”

Tulika Mitra (TM): “Thanks for having me, Yuen Jien.”

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## 2 **Question #1**

SYJ: “What are the current promotion pathways for academics in NUS?”

**(01:08)**

TM: “As a National University and a comprehensive university, we have a wide, diverse, and evolving range of missions and ambitions, in education, research, as well as innovation and enterprise. Our academic talents on the Tenure Track, Educator Track, Practice Track, and Clinician Track form the cornerstone of the University in supporting these missions and visions. We aim to cultivate a distinctive blend of excellence for each

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Track and provide clear pathway(s) to career progression for our academic colleagues.

As you know, our Tenure Track is very well-established and the expectations for promotion are also well aligned with the global best practices. We expect excellence in research but also very good quality teaching and appropriate level of service depending on the seniority. This pathway is thus well-understood. You typically join the Tenure Track as an Assistant Professor and apply for promotion to Associate Professor with tenure after roughly six years. We expect a tenured faculty member to apply for full Professorship within six to eight years. Each promotion and tenure (P&T) application is evaluated in a holistic fashion by external expert reviewers as well as multiple different committees at the Department, Faculty, and University level—the Head, the Dean, the Provost, and the President.

What is, however, very unique and distinctive about NUS is our Educator Track. To support our mission in education that is inspiring and transformational, we need to develop educators who are strong disciplinary teachers, as well as others who can lead in technology-enhanced learning, scholarship of teaching and learning, interdisciplinary education, and lifelong education. Hence, the pathway for promotion on the Educator Track recognises and rewards outstanding teaching and educational leadership.

The Practice Track is usually quite small in most Faculties/Schools and attracts scholar-practitioners who have the professional or leadership skills and expertise to complement the existing teaching and research expertise of the University. They contribute industry and practical experience to the University, adding diversity and enhancing our research and learning about real-life issues and applications. The appointment and promotion on this Track are quite straightforward and do not involve the full set of committees that are required for Tenure Track. We also have a differentiated Practice Track for clinician academics in the School of Medicine.

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Finally, I should mention that you can switch from one Track to another, but only once in your career at NUS. So please do this wisely and carefully.”

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3 **Question #2**

SYJ: “So it does seem that NUS values different types of excellence, and what we like to call ‘the peak of excellence’, and they are really diverse pathways for our colleagues to excel at different things, and achieve different heights.

So we know that there have been some major developments [regarding] promotion pathways for NUS academics. Could you share more about these developments?”

**(04:32)**

TM: “Absolutely! And thank you for asking this question.

As I mentioned, our Tenure Track is quite matured and there is shared and common understanding about tenure process and expectations across the world. But the Educator Track is a bold and innovative pathway that is exclusive to NUS. Back in 2015, the University did a serious reform for this Track. The Associate Professorship on Educator Track now comes with an open contract till the retirement age. But more importantly, the Tenure Track and the Educator Track merge at the full professorial level. An Associate Professor, whether they are on Tenure Track or Educator Track, can apply for full Professor promotion based on peak of excellence in education and if successful, will receive a tenured full professorship. Of course, they can also apply based on peak of excellence in research, which is well known. This is the strongest signal from NUS that we value education and research contributions equally at the highest level. We are one of the very few universities in the world that offer tenured full professorship to excellent educators.

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However, as this is a relatively new Track, the promotion process and expectations are developing over time. My predecessor Professor K. K. Phoon brought clarity to the promotion from Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor in 2017. As you know, instead of asking for six independent external expert review letters, we have a standing external review panel (or ERP) who evaluate all the applications, and the University-level evaluation is carried out by the University Promotion in Educator Track Committee (or UPEC)—I understand you were a member of that Committee—but for Tenure Track, we do that through the University Promotion and Tenure Committee (or UPTC). I think we are again approaching stability with respect to this review process.

But the final missing piece in this puzzle was the clarity about promotion to full professorship with excellence in education. Many of our leading educators, who were promoted to Associate Professor, now aspire to become full Professor. Therefore, I formed a campus-wide task force last year to brainstorm about the expectations. I am grateful for the outstanding support and advice I received from the members of the task force. We also conducted extensive consultation with Educator Track colleagues, senior management at Department, Faculty, and University level through multiple town halls and one-on-one conversations. I am quite happy with the final recommendations as I felt there is broad support from the colleagues across the campus.

As this is a tenured promotion, we have to follow the same structure whether we are looking at excellence in research or education. But we managed to bring clarity to a number of key questions:

- What do we mean by educational leadership?
- What exactly is good quality research in the context of an educator?
- Who should be the external expert reviewers?
- What are the key considerations that would inform external reviewers' letters?

And, as you know, one of the most important parts of a P&T dossier is the five significant publications. What is the equivalent of that for education?

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Finally, and most importantly, are the expectations for promotion to Associate Professor and full Professor aligned?

I think we have formed a good foundation in the form of guidelines in attempting to answer these questions through multiple iterations. These are by no means cast in stone. The expectations may evolve and develop as cases come forward and are considered. But I believe we have a very good starting point and I hope to continue to take this conversation forward.”

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4 **Question #3**

SYJ: “As you mentioned, this is really quite a bold direction that NUS is taking. So, it is understandable that there are things that are being considered and iteratively improved.

So, as the Vice Provost (Academic Affairs), could you share more about your plans to help NUS colleagues to understand these pathways as well as the support systems that are in place to help them to achieve their goals?”

**(09:01)**

TM: “As I said, NUS is a comprehensive university, and our true power comes from the diversity: in terms of the disciplines, in terms of the unique strengths (education, research, or enterprise). Unfortunately, this also makes the promotional pathways quite complex for any single individual to understand. Fortunately, though, there are very few academics in the university who need to understand the intricacies of all the different Tracks. As an academic, you simply need to understand the promotional pathway for the Track where you are in.

So, we have been doing many outreach sessions, workshops, roadshows, small-group chats with our colleagues in different Tracks and different disciplines. We hope to have effective mentorship in place for the Educator Track similar to what we have for the Tenure Track. For Tenure

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Track, the Mid-term Advisory Report (or MTAR) has been in place for a while. It provides comprehensive feedback to Tenure Track Assistant Professors midway through their tenure process.

We make excellent resources available on the Staff Portal. You need to go to the Staff Handbook and then follow the resources for different Tracks under academic staff development. I get rather surprised that many of our colleagues have never looked at the Staff Portal. I also conduct dialogue sessions with the Heads, Deans, and Vice-deans to keep them abreast of the new developments in academic affairs. And of course CDTL has always been an invaluable partner in our support system for academic staff. As you know, Yuen Jien, we hope to launch bite-sized e-modules to offer support to our colleagues in all aspects of their academic life in conjunction with CDTL.

I cannot thank you and your predecessors enough for your collaboration.”

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## **5 Question #4**

SYJ: “It’s our honour and privilege to be able to help in any small way for this initiative.

So, looking ahead, what do you hope to see in terms of the career development of academics at NUS?”

**(10:58)**

TM: “My hopes and dreams for the career development of academics at NUS, I would say, is a combination of abstracts and concrete.

As an NUS academic today, we have access to exciting developments and opportunities, both inside NUS and in Singapore. We are embracing multi- and interdisciplinary education and research in a very big way. We are pursuing the boundaries of technology-enhanced education, especially with the disruptions due to the pandemic. We are seeing greater diversity in our student body with full-time undergraduate students

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complemented by Continuing Education and Training (or CET) students. I think this is a great time to be at NUS and innovate in all aspects of education and research. There is an actual opportunity to provide leadership with cutting-edge research and teaching and make real impact, both locally and globally.

At this point, we attract and recruit the best talents. So, it is imperative that we support, recognise, and reward our colleagues in their journey, and empower them to achieve their full potential. I think we do a good job in providing all the information and support to our pre-tenure colleagues; our tenure success rate is steadily going up, and our aspiration is to reach more than 90% success rate. The success rate for Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor promotion is actually quite high. But, where we hope to do better is for our Associate Professors; convince our colleagues to apply for full Professor promotion. Looking ahead, Associate Professorship should be a short transition phase and everybody should aspire to become full Professor as early as possible.

We have a vibrant community of scholars at NUS. We want to foster a culture of excellence and a collaborative ecosystem that transcends disciplinary boundaries and creates research-education-practice nexus. We are also very much committed to a diverse and inclusive community and want to offer a level playing field to everybody.

At the end of the day, the greatest thing of being in academia is that you can pursue your own interests and make an impact. You can be a deep disciplinary or interdisciplinary expert with scholarly impact. You can be interested in translational, societal, or policy impact. You can offer leadership and influence that enable NUS to excel in its educational mandate. We are very open and celebrate excellence and outstanding impact in all forms. So that is my hope for NUS academics: “Dream your own dream”, shoot for the stars and we will work hard to provide all the resources and support structure to make your dream a reality.”



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### **Closing Remarks (13:47)**

SYJ: “That’s a really inspiring and encouraging message. Thank you very much, Tulika for sharing your insights on this NUS initiative.”

TM: “Thank you, Yuen Jien.”

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### **7 Outro Voiceover**

“Thank you for tuning in to the CDTL podcast.”

### **Outro Music**

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