

# How David Hoe fought his way to university

He helped mum sell tissues at age 7, landed in Normal (Tech) stream, now has teaching scholarship



**Wong Kim Hoh**  
Senior Writer

**M**r David Hoe has a radical teaching idea which he hopes can be realised one day.

"Wouldn't it be great if teachers here could get one year to teach whatever they wanted to teach?" asks the 26-year-old.

"The whole idea is for them to show their students what passion is, how to help them find something they like and pursue it passionately."

The economics undergraduate at the National University of Singapore floated the idea on his Facebook page.

"I just wanted to see what sort of response I would get. Some said there would be chaos. But some said they would go back to school because the level of creativity in the students would shoot through the roof," he says.

The reaction from the second group excites Mr Hoe, who has a scholarship from the Ministry of Education and will undergo training to become a teacher after he graduates next year.

Not everyone thrives academically in school, he says. "But if they get the right motivation and direction, there's still hope. I see value in young people, especially those who feel lost, and I think we should invest in them and give them hope."

He should know. He did so badly in the Primary School Leaving Examination that he landed in the Normal (Technical) stream, meant for the weakest students. But good friends and encouraging teachers changed his life by rescuing him from the academic wilderness.

Today, he is a well-respected youth and student leader, a bright economics undergraduate who has gone on exchange programmes in Harvard as well as Tecnologico de Monterrey, one of the top universities in Mexico.

"People have invested in me and I want to give back. I want to teach because teaching is not just about imparting knowledge but affecting and shaping lives," he says.

Earnest with an infectious joie de vivre, he is the younger of two sons. His parents got divorced when he was just a toddler.

"My dad was a big drinker. After they separated, I went to live with my mother; my elder brother went with my father," he says.

Mother and son lived in a one-room rental flat in Toa Payoh. She earned a living as a supermarket sales promoter but tragedy struck after a cataract operation went

wrong and she became blind.

To make a living, she took to selling packets of tissue paper and other knick-knacks in hawker centres and on the streets. Her seven-year-old son tagged along, acting as her eyes.

It made him slightly resentful.

"I felt life was unfair. I didn't understand why my brother didn't have to do it, while I had to. At most, he helped her only during weekends," he recalls, adding that he looked forward to the monthly visits to his father's home as those were the only times he could sleep in an air-conditioned room.

## Trouble in school

Life became even harder when his mother suffered kidney failure not long after; he had to take her for her dialysis sessions a few times a week.

"I don't blame my mother. She was really good to me, but she wasn't able to help or teach me. To some extent, I felt ashamed and I think it affected my studies," he says.

He attended First Toa Payoh Primary and became quite a handful at school.

"My teacher had to draw a chalk circle and make me sit inside the circle so that I would not disturb the rest of the class," he recalls.

With a grimace, he relates how the discipline master pulled him aside for his lack of personal hygiene when he was in Primary 5. "I remember very vividly that he told me to buy soap. I had to meet him early in the morning before school; he taught me how to wash my own clothes."

When he was 12, his mother had a stroke and died. He went to live with his father, then working as a driver, and brother.

"I really hated them a lot then. I disliked my dad for all sorts of reasons and blamed him for splitting up the family with his drinking. We quarrelled often," he says.

His dismal score of 110 in the PSLE landed him in the Normal (Technical) Stream in Beatty Secondary School and the future did not look promising – at best, he would end up in the Institute of Technical Education if he completed his secondary education.

He fell into bad company, and took up drinking and smoking.

"I was just being delinquent," he says. "I hung out with these people for a few months before I met the right ones."

His new group of friends, he says, often hung out in the canteen to do their homework. They also helped to coach him in his studies.

"They were genuine and I was touched. They had a real sense of community and family which I never experienced. I realised I really enjoyed their company and I enjoyed being taught. It made me want to teach others too," he says.

He set his mind on teaching as a career, a resolve made firmer by a couple of caring teachers and mentors.

One of his teachers, Ms Elizabeth Tan, did such a thorough job of marking his "very bad" English compositions that she reduced him to tears. "But the extent to which she helped me ..." he says, his voice trailing off.

A mentor in church helped him improve his English by buying him Primary 6 English assessment books even though he was in Secondary 4.

"My grammar was really bad and it was humiliating but she just went all out to teach me," he says.

He aced the N levels and was one of Singapore's top Normal (Technical) students in 2005, but the achievement offered cold comfort. "My route was pre-destined. I could go only to the ITE. I was dead set on teaching but that required O levels," he says.

On the advice of his principal, he wrote to then Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam about his dilemma and said that he would like to do his O levels.

The minister wrote back and said he would arrange for him to speak to a cluster head from the ministry.

What happened next was something few others would even consider doing. He returned to Beatty on a scholarship to repeat Secondary 3 and 4 in the Express Stream. That move got him featured in the newspapers.

Subjects such as history, geography and social studies were totally alien to him. "But I was diligent and tried my best. By Term 2, I was promoted to the second-best class from the second-worst class."

He scored four distinctions for his O levels in 2007 and went on to Catholic Junior College, where he took physics, chemistry, maths and economics.

"Junior college was a completely different ball game. Many of the students came from good schools, were more affluent, eloquent and smarter. I had to learn how to adjust," he says.

For the first time in a long while, he started failing his exams. "I knew I was not born smart but I also knew hard work could help to compensate for that to a certain extent," he says.

What kept him going was the desire to give hope to Normal stream students. "There were not too many Normal (Tech) success stories out there then," he says.

His hard work paid off and he did well enough in his A levels to

be offered places in NUS, Singapore Management University as well as Nanyang Technological University.

He opted to study economics at NUS because it was a subject which allowed him "to express his opinions". The teaching scholarship came in very handy.

"I'm not sure if I would have been able to finance my uni studies otherwise. There are bank loans, but I'm not sure if my father or brother has the financial credibility to qualify for a \$20,000 loan," says Mr Hoe. His father is retired and his brother works as a cook.

His scholarship covered his student-exchange programmes to the US and Mexico. The stints have been invaluable, he says.

"I realise that banking will make you a lot of money but it's not what I want to do. I'm really interested in behavioural economics," he says, referring to the study of social, cognitive and emotional factors on the economic decisions of individuals and institutions and their effects on the market.

"I feel that my job as a teacher is not just to impart knowledge but to train my students to see the world," he says.

It explains why he has been doing as many internships as he could secure. He worked for a medical company in Mexico and in addition to teaching stints at St Andrew's Junior College and Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), he is also interning at Microsoft in Singapore.

"Friends ask me why I am doing so many internships. I believe if I want to be a teacher, I want to be a good one who brings real-life experiences into the classroom."

He has a refreshing optimism and a finely tuned social conscience, all the more admirable because he is so young.

During his time in the US and Mexico, he would eat bread and drink water and use the money saved to buy food or have a meal with the homeless and the disaffected even though the areas he visited were often dangerous.

He recounts a time he decided to make a difference in a person's life while in transit in San Francisco en route to Sri Lanka from Mexico.

He invited a homeless man called Rick to a meal at McDonald's.

"Giving him money was one thing, but giving him time was dif-

ferent. It's respect and he deserved to be respected because he's also human," he says.

They sat and talked for an hour.

Rick, he says, told him something which resonated with him.

"He said, 'Even though I'm homeless, I still get a street to sleep on and somehow I will find food. I'm contented and can smile. S\*\*t happens but I choose to take delight for still being alive.'"

### Student mentor

At the NUS residential college Tembusu College, Mr Hoe has rallied students for several projects. One

was a mentoring programme, linking the college to New Town Secondary School.

"I wanted us to interact with students from a neighbourhood school. Many of the residents here will be policymakers in future. I feel that they should learn to understand the ground and when they craft policy in future, realise that there is a group of students they should consider."

Other initiatives he has launched include one where university students read newspapers with underprivileged children who are beneficiaries of The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund.

He also took part in a seven-day, 250km race in the Gobi Desert last year to raise a few thousand dollars for the charity.

"I want to help make university life as enriching as possible. We have been given so much, it is only fair that we should give back," says Mr Hoe, who will speak at The Straits Times Education Forum at the SMU on May 4.

With a shy grin, he lets on a dream: "I have a grand vision. I want to become a person who creates opportunities for young people."

---

✉ [kimhoh@sph.com.sg](mailto:kimhoh@sph.com.sg)

### Turning point

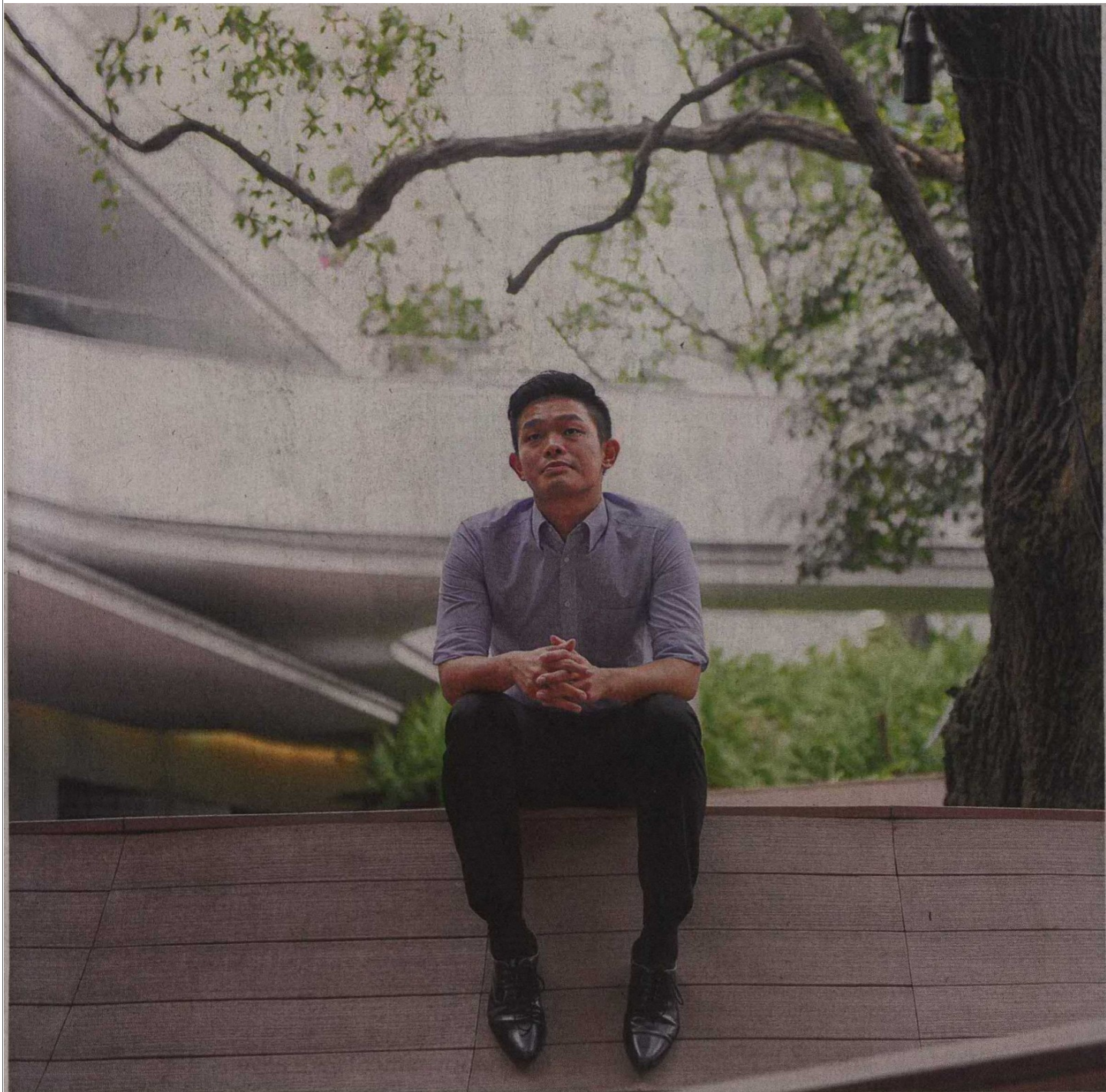
"If not for my friends and teachers who changed my life, I probably would have become a chicken rice uncle. As a kid, I always thought chicken rice sellers make a lot of money because they sold so many plates of rice a day."

MR DAVID HOE, on how he might have turned out if he had not bucked up in his studies

### Making a difference

"I do a lot of youth programmes now because I really understand the different systems. I went through it all. I see a value in helping to change lives."

MR HOE, who has initiated a lot of youth mentoring programmes



**Doing badly in the PSLE landed David Hoe in the weakest Normal (Technical) stream in secondary school. After finishing his N levels, he was so determined to become a teacher, he repeated Secondary 3 and 4 in the Express stream. He is now studying economics at the NUS.**



In the US and Mexico, Mr Hoe had bread and water for meals, using the money he saved to feed the homeless and the disaffected. Mr Hoe with a homeless man called Rick (above) and a homeless woman (top).