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Tembusu College to miss 'rockstar' rector Tommy Koh



Professor Tommy Koh will be stepping down from his post at the end of June. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE



[Amelia Teng](#)

PUBLISHED 4 HOURS AGO

SINGAPORE - Professor Tommy Koh may have had an illustrious career in global diplomacy, but to the staff and students at National University of Singapore's (NUS) Tembusu College, he is a "rockstar" and a hero.

The veteran diplomat and negotiator is the founding rector of the residential college - now home to about 600 students - that opened its doors in 2011.

More than a decade later, the 84-year-old professor is finally taking a breather. At the end of June, he will be bidding his students and colleagues farewell, as he steps down from his post.

At the end of March, he also relinquished his chairmanship of two other NUS units - the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum and the Centre for International Law.

In an e-mail interview, Prof Koh, who is also Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large, said: "It is past time for me to hand over my many jobs to younger successors. It is the right thing to do."

Tembusu College was one of the first two residential colleges in Singapore to have students and professors living and learning under one roof when it opened in 2011.

Such colleges have interdisciplinary academic programmes for students from different faculties.



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Students at Tembusu College take five seminar-style modules during their two-year stay.

Prof Koh told ST he will miss interacting with students the most, in particular during out-of-classroom events such as the Tembusu Forum, the Rector's Dinner, and the Master's Teas.

"The only job I have ever applied for, in my long career, was to teach at the NUS Law school," said Prof Koh, who was dean of the law school from 1971 to 1974.

"I love my students and my students love me in return."

Over the years, he has organised the Tembusu Forum - the college's flagship event that takes place twice a semester - 41 times. Topics covered include the US-China rivalry, lessons learnt from Covid-19, and women in Singapore.



Prof Koh said he will miss interacting with students the most, in particular during out-of-classroom events. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF

"I hope my successor will continue with this flagship project," he said, adding that he regularly donates the college books and magazines he has read.

"I remember that a student studying architecture told one of his teachers that staying at Tembusu College changed his life. I think he meant that he was able to meet students from other faculties, to study together in smaller seminars, and to learn about things outside his domain knowledge, both in and out of the classroom," Prof Koh said.

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He will be succeeded by Mrs Lim Hwee Hua, former minister in the Prime Minister's Office, who has various corporate positions in private equity and financial services.

Associate Professor Gregory Clancey, Tembusu College's first Master, said that Prof Koh gave far more of himself to the college than was expected.

"He took what could have been a largely ceremonial position and made it into a real job, committing significant time, energy and creativity to make the experiment a success," he said.

The Tembusu Forum was his signature contribution, but he did much more, from organising themes and guest lists for annual dinners to arranging special events for specific groups of students, said Prof Clancey, adding that the college came to reflect his personality, interests and values.

"He said early on that he intended to 'bring the world to Tembusu and Tembusu to the world', and he fulfilled that promise," he added.

"Dozens of ambassadors and other prominent guests came to dinner and rubbed shoulders with undergraduates due to his influence. And he always insisted on seating prominent guests among students and not with each other or professors."

Prof Koh's attention to students made him not just a well-loved figure but, as staff used to say, "a rockstar" and a hero to undergraduates, said Prof Clancey.

"The number of selfies with Prof Koh in the phones of young Singaporeans is a testament to his accessibility and popularity."

Prof Clancey said he hoped the college would preserve the values and interests that Prof Koh championed.



Prof Koh has organised the Tembusu Forum, the college's flagship event that takes place twice a semester, 41 times. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

Its students have nicknamed Tembusu College "Home of Possibilities"; that would not have been possible without the openness, optimism, enthusiasm, and energy that Prof Koh brought to his rectorship, he said.

Students have also named the college "houses" after endangered Asian animal species to honour Prof Koh's commitment to biodiversity. The college colour is green, and Tembusu is an environmentally-themed college in alignment with Prof Koh's role in putting climate change on the global agenda.

Fourth-year arts and social sciences student Ting Wan Lin, 23, who stays in Tembusu College, said she was impressed by Prof Koh's knowledge and passion about climate change, women's rights, and Singapore's place in the world.

"He always encourages students to be optimistic and curious about the world, and I definitely have to thank Prof Koh for the numerous opportunities and words of advice that he has given to Tembusians over the years," she said.

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NUS alumnus Murni Marisa, 27, who had worked closely with local and foreign ambassadors, diplomats and visitors who came to Tembusu College, said she benefitted from Prof Koh's wisdom and experiences as Ambassador-at-Large.

"Prof Koh was always candid and personable in all his interactions with students and always willing to exchange views on difficult issues. Through these experiences, I was able to further enrich my student life by being exposed to a myriad of topics that went beyond my area of study."

In a letter of appreciation in March, NUS president Tan Eng Chye thanked Prof Koh for his dedication and contributions.

"Under your leadership, Tembusu College has developed into an exciting and vibrant living and learning environment for its students," he said.

Associate Professor Ho Chee Kong, Master of Tembusu College, said Prof Koh has been one of the pillars contributing to its growth.

"He has been steadfast in bringing the world not only to Tembusu but also to many other student communities in NUS; he has also brought about much needed understanding of how the larger issues of the world can impact Singapore and her citizens," he said.

Dr Kelvin Pang, another former Master of Tembusu College, said of Prof Koh: "He has been the best role model the college could have ever asked for - he speaks up against injustices and inequalities, and advocates for the betterment of the world.

"His care and commitment towards people, the environment, arts and heritage, as well as for Singapore, has been and will continue to be a source of inspiration to our students."



Prof Koh said the only job he ever applied for was to teach at the NUS Law School. He was later dean from 1971 to 1974. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

Of his work at the Centre for International Law, Professor Simon Chesterman, NUS law dean, said: "Tommy has had an extraordinary impact on the field of international law. He's taught it, he's represented Singapore in it, and he's played key roles at the United Nations to develop it."

He added that Prof Koh helped to chart the centre's original vision and mission, positioning Singapore as a thought leader and raising the profile of Asia-Pacific in global debates that tend to focus on the West.

Prof Clancey added: "While Prof Koh is well-known globally as a diplomat, he also deserves to be known as a committed educator who helped create, in Tembusu, a model college for the 21st century."

"This should rank highly among his many contributions to Singapore, especially given that he energetically took on the task late in life, after so many other accomplishments."

Growing with the college

In April 2018, Tembusu College student [Kathy Ong died after being involved in a road accident](#). The 19-year-old was a rear-seat passenger in a taxi with three other friends when it collided with a car at the intersection of Clementi Road and Commonwealth Avenue West.

They were all residents of the college at the National University of Singapore and were on their way there that night.

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Said Prof Koh: "An institution is tested by adversity. Some collapse and others become stronger. I am very proud of the way in which the Master, Fellows and students responded to the accident. They went, in large numbers, to Kathy's wake, to console her parents."

They also visited the three injured students, especially one of whom was in a coma for many days, he said.

"The college was united in grief, compassion and loyalty."

To honour Kathy Ong, Tembusu College launched a book prize named after her in 2019. Her parents came to the college in the first year to hand it to the recipient. The college also planted a Tembusu tree on a hill opposite the college building in her memory.

Kathy's father, Mr Keith Ong, said that he and his wife were honoured to have been invited to the college's formal dinner and first award ceremony for the prize.

"It was very meaningful for us because we were presenting the award to someone from Kathy's cohort who knew Kathy in person. We are certain that the recipient will feel the special connection with Kathy.

"The formal dinners in the two following years were suspended due to Covid-19 restrictions but the college continued to give out the awards, and we were informed in writing of the winners. We are very thankful to Prof Koh and his team in Tembusu College for such thoughtfulness," he said.

Mr Ong added that Tembusu College was his daughter's second home and the place where she felt a strong sense of belonging, warmth and love.

"As Kathy's parents, seeing her being honoured and remembered annually for her beliefs and love for the environment means a lot to us... We have been visiting the Tembusu tree regularly and there is a sense of connection with it. Seeing the tree growing taller and stronger warms our hearts," he said.



Students nicknamed Tembusu College "Home of Possibilities" because of the openness, optimism, enthusiasm, and energy that Prof Koh brought. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

In 2020, [Dr Jeremy Fernando, a former Tembusu College fellow, was sacked by NUS](#) following allegations of sexual misconduct against him by two students.

When asked what the college has learnt from this episode, Prof Koh said: "We could have handled the Jeremy Fernando case much better. Students and alumni should have been informed promptly, before they learnt it from the media.

"We need to be open and transparent with our students, particularly on issues involving staff misconduct and student welfare."