

1. PREPARATION AND PLANNING

My recent teaching background

Prior to accepting the STINT scholarship, I served as director of Faculty of Arts Doctoral College for six years and had a substantial portion of research in my position. Most of teaching in recent years has been generic academic skills courses for the doctoral college or online master's classes in the medical humanities. I left Sweden for my STINT stay, excited to get back in the classroom and to teach literary studies.

Planning Trip

I decided to forego the planning trip due to anticipated costs of living in Singapore (see "finances" section below). I made contact with the administrative and academic contacts immediately after receiving the news. I was informed that I would be teaching a "Grad level foundational course" in English literature. I was also given a course description, sample syllabus and reading list. From the materials provided, it seemed like a typical literary theory course, which I have taught before at Umeå. The only difference is that it would be entirely on campus rather than online. I was also familiar with the key texts, and I bought my own copies to bring with me and made a loose thematic plan to cover a different theory to cover each week and to read *Frankenstein* through different theoretical lenses. I was to teach alone.

Visa arrangements

Despite beginning arrangements immediately, our visa process took a long time, so long that we were not able to book our tickets until early June. This is far later than I would have liked for a mid-July departure. Ultimately, I was granted an employment pass and my husband a "dependent's pass".

Arrival in Singapore

My husband and I left Sweden on 15 July. Although term did not start until the second week of August, I know that I have difficulty adjusting time zones. We took this time to get to learn environs, the university shuttle system, transportation in Singapore, as well as to acclimatize. I also met my head of department (English, Linguistics and Theatre Studies) during my second week here. From this meeting, it became clear that my course would not be what I had expected. The head of department told me that most of the students of this course would be from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and would likely have some language issues. He said that these courses were relatively new and that he hoped that the academic level of this course would eventually reach that of the typical NUS graduate degree.

2. TASKS, RESPONSIBILITIES and ENVIRONMENT

Self-funded taught master's courses

I was to teach on one of three self-funded master's courses offered in the department. Beginning in 2020, NUS began introducing self-funded master's courses by coursework in distinction to the master's degree by research. The NUS web site lists some of these 185 self-funded programmes.¹ The distinction between the degree by coursework and research is great, with smaller more specialized classes for the research degree and a more selective admissions process. My class had 23 students, but the usual number is between 25-35. While Singaporean students are eligible for a hefty discount, non-Singaporean students pay the equivalent of 325.000 sek for the programme. Quoted in the *Straits Times*, the president of NUS Tan Eng Chye stated that such courses "capitalis[e] on NUS's brand."² This strategy has been employed in UK universities.

Initial plan for course content

While every teaching situation involves some level of flexibility, this semester was the time when I had to think most on my feet. Often week to week, I had to change my plan according to my developing understanding of my students' needs. It was challenging to get the level right. There were native speakers in my class with an English degree or another honour's degree. There were L2 speakers with excellent written and critical abilities but poorer oral skills. There were more confident L2 speakers with less experience in literary criticism (see more under "student body"). And, of course, as in most classes, there were a few with little interest in being there at all. The trick was to try to reach (almost) everyone without patronizing anyone.

I was assigned one of the two foundational courses that all the students on the taught master's course have to take. My course was "Survey of the Discipline: Methods and Approaches" and the other course was "Literary Studies: Overview and Writing Practices". Both course descriptions were rather vague, as to allow each lecturer some freedom. As the descriptions of both these courses overlapped, I consulted the lecturer of the other foundational course immediately upon arriving in Singapore and learning his name. From him, I learned that he planned to teach literary theory, and he thought my role was to teach literary history through the key movements and historical periods. While different from what I had planned, I thought teaching literary history sounded rather fun as I am a specialist in historical literature. I rarely get to teach historical texts in Sweden, or certainly not an entire course's worth of them.

I drafted a plan of covering representative texts each week from the major literary periods starting from Old English and going to the early 20th century. However, I realized this was far too ambitious. So I decided to reduce the amount of ground to cover, lingering on individual

¹ <https://www.nus.edu.sg/registrar/docs/info/administrative-policies-procedures/self-funded-graduate-programmes.pdf>

² <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/parenting-education/nus-masters-programmes-to-cease-receiving-govt-subsidies-nus-president>

texts for much longer and incorporating adaptations as part of my teaching strategy. For the first week, I introduced periodization and its problems, discussed how to perform close reading and did some in class. For the following three weeks, we focused on one of *The Canterbury Tales* (The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale) in modern English translation. Because of the varying abilities in the student body, I lectured far more than I would in a master's seminar. Still, I wanted at least half the class to be discussion. So, I created some discussion questions for small groups and we re-convened at the end of class to summarize those discussions. We focused on the Wife of Bath for two weeks, each having a thematic focus. In the first week, I lectured on the Middle Ages and medieval literature. In the second week, I lectured on women in the Middle Ages – fictional and real. In the third week, we focused on critical approaches and adaptations of the Wife of Bath. I think this worked fairly well, but I noticed that many were lost on critical approaches. In order to introduce these approaches, I had to give a potted explanation of theory, as not all were familiar with literary theory. Ultimately, I thought this unsatisfying, so I decided to focus more on historical background and to help them develop their own readings. Moving on to the Early Modern period, I wanted to give them three weeks to read *Macbeth*. In the first week, I gave an overview of the history, culture and literature of the period and we did some close reading of a couple sonnets as a group. In the second week, I continued my historical and cultural lecture and we focused on the play. In the third week, we focused on adaptations, giving them half the class to work on their group presentations, which were to present an adaptation of their own of a soliloquy or short scene from the play.

Revising plans based on coursework

By this point, I had received their mid-term essays, and I felt I needed to make another adjustment to my teaching plans. There were multiple problems with the essays (see cheating and plagiarism section below) I received. I allowed everyone a resubmission without penalty, which most took advantage of. However, I realized that I could not assume that we were on the same page about generative AI and plagiarism, despite written and oral instructions from me. Additionally, there were many issues with finding reliable sources. I realized I had taken it for granted that such issues would have been addressed during their undergraduate degree.

I came up with a new plan. I scrapped the next week's lesson instead to dedicate an entire lesson on the research process, including finding and evaluating sources, note taking and developing a thesis. I went back to teaching literature for the next two classes, but also included a writing workshop portion for each. The idea was for them to bring in their essays in progress for peer review. This design served multiple purposes: to have them begin their essays earlier, to practice reading and thinking critically about other's work and to prevent or at least limit generative AI use. For the first writing workshop, we focused on text-level aspects of academic writing, such as structure, paragraphing, introductions, and conclusions. For the next writing workshop, we focused on the sentence-level aspects of academic writing, such as topic sentences and transitions. We also discussed editing. For both workshops, they were given some guidelines about how to evaluate their peers' work.

Student Body

All but three of my 23 students in my class were from the PRC. The remaining three were Singaporean and Indian. There was only one male student. There were some language issues, as I was prepared for. I also anticipated reticence in speaking in class and group discussions. This proved correct. Language issues differed enormously between each student. Some had spent some time abroad, even gaining work experience and education in English-speaking countries. Others were very gifted in written English but struggled with understanding and producing spoken English. Some students relied on translator apps with microphone to follow my lectures, and some used Chat GPT to generate responses for class discussions. There was some discussion of a cap on the number of students from one country coming into effect soon. I understand that the department introduced an interview component for the theatre studies programme and will do so for the literary studies coursework for the next intake. The admissions rates do suggest increasing selectiveness. In literary studies, the admissions rate went from 67% in 2022 to 36% in 2024. In general, students in my class were far less confident in speaking than my students in Sweden.

Assessment methods

While I was free to change the course content, I was informed that I could not change the assessment components. Those were stipulated as follows: 1) a mid-term essay of 1500 words weighted at 20% 2) a final essay of 3000 words weighted at 50% 3) a group project weighted at 20% and class participation weighted at 10%.

For the first assignment, I assigned a close reading. However given the misunderstanding about sources and generative AI, we worked in class on their final essay. This could be on a pre-1800 text of their choice.

I was a little anxious about the group assignment, as the student body was so diverse in their language abilities. For the group assignment, I adapted an assignment I use in my online Shakespeare course. Each group had to adapt a scene from *Macbeth*. Initially, many students were reticent. However, the assignment was a hit. The students really outdid themselves in terms of creativity and critical thinking. For example, one group revised the witches as McKinsey consultants advising the Trump campaign. Another reimagined Lady Macbeth as a bored and frustrated expat wife in Singapore.

Courseload

Even some of the best, most prepared students fell behind toward the end of the semester. The reason is easy to understand. Full-time students take 5 courses a semester. These courses meet from 6-8:30 p.m. When I asked the explanation, I was told that some students worked. Most of my students had far too much to manage with their coursework and were not even eligible to work in the country. By the end of the day, they were tired. I was tired. It was not the best arrangement. Students can take the course at a slower pace, but given the expense of living in

Singapore (they are not offered university accommodation), this is not really an option for most of the international students.

Grading

I had reservations about how to assess work for a course of this type. A couple of my colleagues suggested that As and Bs were the norm, with perhaps a few Cs owing to missed assignments. It is my understanding—based on conversations with people at NUS, my STINT colleagues in other Singaporean universities, and past STINT reports—that students generally expect to pass their courses once they are admitted to an undergraduate or graduate programme in Singapore. I persisted in questioning my colleagues as I was quite certain that at least a couple of students would submit work generated by AI. I got a mix of responses. One suggested that it “would not be appreciated” if I were to submit such cases to the disciplinary committee. Another suggested that I could give such students the lowest passing grade – a D minus – as the students had “paid so much to be here”. Others suggested C plus.

Disciplinary cases

In the end, two students submitted final essays that I could not pass. When I asked a representative of the disciplinary committee, he was receptive and did not try to talk me out of it. The paperwork was more onerous at NUS than at my home university. The burden rests entirely on the reporting teacher, rather than the disciplinary committee to prove wrongdoing. I had to fill out several documents for each case. One document even asked me to list a percentage of cheating. Such a question suggests that the procedures were based on traditional plagiarism and the features of plagiarism detection software. Indeed, I believe these were the first ever AI disciplinary cases in the department. The two students were charged, but the consequence is only failing my course. They will not be suspended as far as I understand.

Cheating and plagiarism

While I clearly forbid the use of generative AI on my course site, it was clear that many students did not see or understand the warning, ignored it or did not take me seriously. All but a few resubmitted their essays. Five had to be re-submitted again a further time for similar issues. Students on the department’s self-funded master’s courses were given some warnings about plagiarism before they started the course but AI was not included in this introductory education.

Ethical stress

Throughout the term, I felt increasingly uncomfortable about the teaching arrangement. It was clear to me that there are two “classes” of graduate students: those on the self-funded master’s programme by coursework and those on the master’s programme by research. When I shared this impression to a colleague, they laughed and said of course, there were two classes of graduate students. They further added that they would never write a reference for a student on the self-funded master’s programme. I thought this unfair and painted all the students in the

same light. During the course of my semester, I came to know several of my students quite well, some of whom I think could successfully pursue further graduate studies. In any event, if any of them hope to do a PhD, they will likely need another master's degree, as there is no thesis component for the self-funded master's programme by coursework. On behalf of those students in my class who were highly intelligent and worked very hard, I felt upset that people who did not have a decent command of English and coasted along would receive the same degree (with minimal grade variation) as they would. Furthermore, students on the self-funded master's programme did not seem fully integrated into the department. Besides a welcome tea in their first week, there were no events or activities for them. My students were not even aware of a graduate reading room available to them, a place that could serve as an alternative to the over-crowded library and a venue where they could organize their own events. It was clear that lecturers preferred to teach undergraduates. With only a few graduate research students, students on the self-funded master's seemed to be viewed as a necessary evil, an important source of income. I hope that future STINT fellows at NUS will take this under advisement. I reiterate that these self-funded programmes are not unique to my department but are a university-wide initiative (see "self-funded taught master's courses" above).

Other activities during the fellowship

While I was at NUS, there was not a research seminar in English literature. I find this a great disadvantage for graduate students. My students had little opportunity to learn about the research process or to meet other students and lecturers outside their classes. Linguistics seems far more active with almost weekly meetings. The environment as a whole was rather gloomy and ghostly. Academics seem only to be at their university right before and after their scheduled teaching. This meant that I did not get much of a chance to meet many academics in my department. The handful of regulars I did meet were supportive, kind and funny, and I am grateful for their companionship and conversation. Overall, I felt quite lonely during my time at NUS. During the initial part of my stay, I did reach out to academics and my academic contact kindly put me in touch with scholars in my field, too. However, my teaching proved more work than I thought. I constantly had to readjust lesson plans to try to fit my shifting understanding of my students' needs and abilities. I also began to feel too emotionally drained to do much outside of my course.

3. COMPARISON BETWEEN HOST AND THE HOME INSTITUTIONS

Pedagogy, research and job security

NUS has both an educator and a research track. It seemed that pressure on academics was extremely high regardless of whichever track they were on. The educator track could result in tenure with the highest grade of "associate professor." Otherwise, teachers are on temporary contracts. I met a few people on the educator track, one of whom had already attained tenure, and I was impressed by the seriousness of their pedagogy. Among a staff of 16 in English literature, four are assistant professors, eight are associate professors, two are professors, and two are university lecturers. In comparison to my much smaller subject within my department,

we have a full-time staff of six in English literature (not counting doctoral researchers), of whom three are university lecturers and three are professors. One stark contrast is that almost all academics in the department have PhDs from outside Singapore. It was conveyed as almost necessary to have a PhD a top institution abroad to be employed at NUS.

I took the distinct impression that the emphasis on rankings was oppressive. While I think that the educator track balances a research-intensive university such as NUS, I do not think that this is something that would be beneficial in my home university. We, like other Swedish universities, have the system of pedagogical distinction. My department has a minimum teaching load for all academics, regardless of external funding or position. Likewise, all academics have time in their positions for “competence development”, which can be used for research. While this may not always work in practice, I think the ideal – that all academics engage in research and teaching – can lead to a more harmonious work environment and a better learning experience for students.

Curriculum and courses offered

One key difference between NUS and Umeå is that all courses are campus courses. Singapore is spatially small enough that there is not much need for online education. In terms of the variety of courses offered, there is more of an emphasis on post-colonial and Asian literature as to be expected. While students on the MA by research could take the courses on the MA by coursework programme, MA by coursework students could not take those offered to MA by research students. This frustrated at least one of my excellent students, who was looking for something more challenging and more closely aligning with their interests. As the numbers on the MA by research are so small, I understand this will change.

The English language linguistics and theatre studies department and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences are not the only institutions to offer literature courses at NUS. Yale-NUS is a small college within NUS that offers a residential liberal arts education. However, Yale-NUS will close at the end of next term (spring 2025) Various reasons have been reported for this closure: lack of funds, academic freedom (cancellation of controversial courses) and freedom of speech (LGBT rights demonstrations).³ I also heard these reasons from different people. Yale-NUS is to be replaced by NUS-College. Some academics I spoke with feared that this was not a liberal arts modelled on Yale but more STEM in disguise.

³ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/parenting-education/whats-behind-the-decision-to-close-yale-nus-college>



Use of technology/IT in education and infrastructure

As I said, I taught by myself, so I am not in a place to comment on the use of technology generally at NUS. Like my university, all lecture rooms seem equipped with adequate adapters and cables to enable lecturers to connect their computers to a projector. This worked pretty seamlessly.

It took an awfully long time access to email and Canvas. I was particularly anxious as my understanding of the course had changed so dramatically. I wanted to be able to communicate with my students as soon as possible. Despite arriving on 15 July and making this a priority, I did not have access until 7 August, one week before class started.

I was quite surprised by some of the byzantine infrastructure at the department. In order to print, one has to upload documents onto a USB stick, then go up a flight of stairs, enter a locked room, (often) boot up an ancient computer, open the documents and then send them to an ancient printer. This printer simply did not work many times, and I saw a trail of error messages from many of my colleagues on these occasions. I suppose most use digital PDFs, but I deliberately use paper for close reading in class. I was also a little surprised that I was denied a USB stick. The administrator said it would be too much trouble to get it back from me when I left NUS.

Forms of examination

There was no great difference here. Most courses in the MA programme seemed to use traditional essays and presentations. The essay length was quite a bit shorter than I would assign on a specialized master's course in Sweden.

Labour market

What happens next was on the minds of many of my students. They were anxious about securing jobs and what kinds of jobs their degrees might open up to them. Many were already busy looking into other master's programmes to complete after their NUS degree. As I mentioned, there was no thesis component for the MA by coursework. Others had attended job fairs provided by NUS and were discouraged both by the appropriateness of jobs on offer and

their possibilities of securing a visa (in the case of students from the PRC). My students were concerned about dwindling opportunities of teaching jobs in the PRC in particular. I am a little removed from such fears and concerns among my master's students in Sweden. Most who take my courses are already employed and take my course as continuing education. However, I am certainly aware of such fears among doctoral researchers.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS TO FUTURE PARTICIPANTS

Finances

I strongly recommend to future STINT fellows in Singapore that you not try to get by on the stipend, certainly not if you are taking your spouse or partner. I knew that we would need extra finances, so we dipped into our personal savings and I worked another job the term before we left. We knew that we did not want to live at a subsistence level, as that would limit the range and value of our experience. After being in Singapore for some weeks, my husband and I decided that we would rather spend our savings on travel rather than nicer experiences in Singapore (restaurants, museums, events etc). To that end, we lived rather modestly in Singapore, cooking many meals out of our meager kitchenette but travelled extravagantly to much less expensive places in the region. I do not regret our decision.

Accommodation

Unlike my other two STINT Singapore colleagues, we were fortunate to secure university accommodation. Kent Vale is an academic enclave on the edge of the Kent Ridge Campus. It's a beautiful place, and I enjoyed going for a long swim every morning in pool. I worked on my crawl here, even engaging a swim instructor who met me at the Kent Vale pool. I suppose we were not meant to use the kitchenette as much as we did, as there were meager options: 2 plates, 2 tiny hotel-sized mugs, a broken rice cooker, etc. We ended up buying a pot, a pair of scissors, a knife and a couple of mugs so we could make basic meals. I heard from other residents that there is a strict prohibition on guests, so that might explain the ascetic provisions in terms of cutlery and dishes. Unfortunately, Kent Vale is rather far away from the nearest MRT (subway) station. One can take a free university shuttle bus there, but at times, the use of the shuttle was regulated and the shuttle stops running at about 11 p.m. One can take a Grab (the southeast Asian Uber) but that is rather an expensive solution. From about five minutes away, one can take a bus downtown, which takes 45 minutes to an hour. We mostly did this.

Campus Life

NUS has an expansive and leafy campus, or rather two campuses, connected by a free shuttle service. One can take one shuttle all the way to the Botanic Gardens. Most on-campus activities were directed to undergraduate students. However, Kent Vale is located across the street from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music where we enjoyed a few excellent and inexpensive concerts. Next to the conservatory was the University Cultural Centre. During our time there, we did not find any cultural events advertised. There was a conference on that I was a little

interested in, but the fee was 150 SGD and did not include anything other than the sessions and lunch. There were multiple libraries on campus, and I enjoyed working at the NUS-Yale Library the most. It had a better selection of physical books and a more quiet and relaxed atmosphere than the Central Library. Some of my students complained about the “chope” system at the Central Library. To chope means to reserve seats, usually with a tissue packet, at hawker centres. Students need to electronically “chope” a seat the Central Library as there are not enough places to meet the demand.

Life in Singapore

Food and Drink: It is possible to eat very cheaply in hawker centres. There is a café in the Central Library where you can build your own salad for about the cost of a Swedish lunch. I did this almost every day. The nicer restaurants in Singapore were excellent, but expensive. Alcohol is extremely expensive in Singapore (even more so than in Sweden). However, there are many happy hours and other promotions. There are some spectacular bars here if you are willing to spend money on a cocktail. Check out Atlas Bar and the Writers Bar in Raffles Hotel at your own risk.

Culture: We were a little put off by prices to cultural events, such as theatre, as a mistake could be financially devastating. We did attend one opera while we were here. Two museums I can recommend are the National Museum of Singapore for a well-presented introduction to Singaporean history and Haw Par Villa for its gruesome dioramas of the courts of hell.

Cultural Interaction: Unfortunately, we found very few opportunities to interact with Singaporeans. I did not meet so many colleagues through work as I had hoped, and everyone who lived in Kent Vale was foreign. I only had two Singaporean students. Both had studied at NUS for their undergraduate degrees, and they certainly represented the high quality of an NUS undergraduate education. We were in Singapore for the National Day (9 August), and it was an experience watching the rehearsal from a distance, which we did from a high rise office building. It's quite a spectacle with the elite “red lions” parachuting from on high, a 21-gun salute to the president and a National Day theme song composed annually.



5. TAKE-AWAY

First and foremost, I want potential STINT fellows to be aware of the possibility of being assigned a self-funded master's degree by coursework. Had I known the specifics, I would not have agreed. That said, I do not regret the experience. After my initial disappointment, I took the chance to learn from the students I did have. While I am not taking back anything tangible to the classroom, I do feel the purpose and significance of my discipline more clearly and immediately than I have in years or perhaps than I ever have. I am very grateful for the openness and inspiration offered by many of my students. Here I will list a few things that might impact me in my future work in Sweden.

Placement

As elsewhere, the humanities in Sweden are suffering from perceived lack of employability. A degree in the humanities provides an excellent foundation for many professions. To this end, I think we could keep better track of where our alumni end up. While this might prove difficult on the undergraduate level, it could be easier on the master's and PhD level. Some American universities have a placement section on their web sites, stating where their graduates end up working, whether inside the academy or outside. This could counter the unemployability narrative and demonstrate the diversity of possibilities post-graduation.

Engagement

At my home faculty and department, there is almost complete freedom to start new initiatives if one finds the time and energy. This openness was one of the first things that impressed me about Umeå. There is also a tremendous amount of freedom in terms of speaking up. We have a staff meeting every month, and our head of department's office is on a corridor with ours, not on a separate floor cordoned off by administrative staff. People come to work, and it is possible to exchange views in informal and formal settings. I think this sabbatical has certainly given me the energy and motivation to be more engaged.

Career support for international academics

To that end, I'm interested in supporting academics with international backgrounds. I think we have far too few in my immediate environment. Sweden gave me a relatively clear path to citizenship and career advancement, I would like to ensure that remains the case for others.

Final word

I have been working in Sweden since 2011 and have been a dual citizen of the United States and Sweden for many years. It has certainly been long enough to take things for granted. This sabbatical afforded me the opportunity to reflect upon how much I have absorbed and come to appreciate Swedish values about higher education, namely a commitment to free education and lifelong learning.