

Applying science to politics



Yap Soo Huey

Course graduated from: BSc (Hons) majoring in biotechnology

Year of graduation: 2005

Job: State assembly member seat of Pulau Tikus, Penang, Malaysia.

Career: Science, Technology and Innovation Officer in the office of the Chief Minister of Penang, project manager for Penang's "Tech Dome".

Reflection: "Science is about learning about things – and being able to apply an open mind to the understanding of data and information."

As a schoolgirl growing up on the Malaysian island of Penang, Yap Soo Huey was excited to be living in a developing country where she could see a huge need for change.

She wanted to go on and make a political contribution, either in an NGO or as part of an advocacy group. But it also had to be something that interested her.

Science was a good fit on both counts.

As a child she'd been fascinated by trees and loved the way biology showed her how natural systems work. As a teenager she was keen on the idea of being able to use that understanding for a practical purpose.

Enrolled at Monash Gippsland, she did her honours project on gene expression in HIV and went on to the prestigious Burnet Institute to begin a PhD study on the enzyme responsible for the replication of the HIV virus.

Politics was a distraction from science

While she was fascinated by her research, and excelled, she found herself increasingly distracted by her passionate interest in political developments at home.

In October 2010 she met the Chief Minister of Penang in Melbourne. They spoke about a possible role for her with the island state's science council.

Choosing politics over a PhD

In 2011 she decided to abandon her PhD and return home. "There was an opportunity to contribute more directly and I took it," says Yap, now 31.

"At the moment we are at a crossroads in Malaysian politics. What happens over the next five years will determine the country's trajectory."

She was appointed Science, Technology and Innovation Officer in the Chief Minister's office. She has organised the Penang International Science Fair and has been appointed project manager for "Tech Dome" (techdomepenang.org) – a super-modern high-tech science museum due to open at the end of 2014.

State Assembly Member

Yap is also a member of the Penang State Assembly. This involves her in urban planning and social welfare and dealing with issues ranging from children with special needs to the management of the Penang Botanic Gardens.

Knowledge based decision making: from science

Her science background helps her manage the information deluge that has come with this new life as a politician. It's also ideal preparation for the "knowledge-based decision-making" that she believes in.

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