

Alumna Uma Natarajan Works to Improve Education Policy in Asia

A 2015 alumna of the [graduate certificate program in Gender, Leadership and Public Policy](#), Uma Natarajan is Principal Researcher in the Education and Policy unit of the HEAD Foundation. Uma also holds a Doctorate in Education from Edith Cowan University in Australia.

Like many GLPP students, you already came to the program with an advanced degree and a track record of professional experience. What made you become interested in pursuing public policy?

I wanted to understand the policy dilemmas in issues around education, poverty, women's education, and why finding solutions to these problems is not as easy as one would think. I also wanted to have a deeper understanding of the politics behind policy making and how it is crucial for change to happen. There are tools in this field that one should know if one is keen to influence and advocate for issues that are important for the betterment of society.

Can you tell us more about the work at The HEAD Foundation in Singapore where you work?

The HEAD Foundation is a policy think tank devoted to research and policy influence for development in Asia. We focus on middle-income countries in the ASEAN region like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the

Philippines. We collaborate with like-minded regional and international institutions which include several universities and centers like the University of Pennsylvania, INSEAD Global Leadership Centre, Boston College and University of Glasgow, to name a few, and we are working on other partnerships with University College London and UNESCO Bangkok. Our staff is very diverse—from Thailand, the Philippines, India, and Singapore. And the managing director, David Scott Clegg, who is also a *Huffington Post* writer, is from the USA.

What is your role there as Principal Researcher?

We are looking at building capacity in the region in terms of improving teacher quality and are getting together a group of thought leaders in the region to share best practices. My role focuses on teacher quality and teacher education in the middle-income ASEAN countries. I read the available literature, understand what works and the lessons learned from the reforms, suggest what might be applicable for a country's teacher education program, and possibly tweak a reform model. I really enjoy the discussions around policy borrowing—this means what countries learn from one another—in terms of what works and how culture and context play a crucial role while adapting policies to local contexts.

What was your experience like as a student in the graduate certificate program at UMass Boston? How did the program help to advance your career?

For me, the best part of the program was my internship at one of the world's top 10 education policy think tanks, the Harvard Center for Education Policy Research. This experience helped me to transfer my policy theory knowledge into practice. I use what I learned there in my current role in developing teacher education research and policy. Every day, I am putting into practice what I learned there.

Another highlight was Professor Ann Bookman's class, Contemporary American Public Policy Issues. This class focuses on policy framing, about how you design policy and implement it in a particular context, and what you should keep in mind when you suggest policy reforms. This knowledge has also been very helpful in my current work.

Uma spoke with newsletter editor Muna Killingback.