



Mr Joseph Yang was on the Dean's List for exceptional students throughout his four years in university.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NUS

Slow start, but going back to school pays off

In primary school, Mr Joseph Yang was always ranked among the bottom few in class.

He failed English at the O levels and went to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), where he studied electrical engineering.

Fifteen years later, Mr Yang, 34, an executive engineer with SMRT, is a graduate of the National University of Singapore (NUS).

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in electronics engineering with honours (highest distinction) last Wednesday.

Said Mr Yang: "All these years, I've tried to gain back what I lost. When I was young, I didn't study hard enough. I always did last-minute work and if I didn't understand something, I did nothing about it."

The turning point came during his six-year stint in the navy, where he worked after graduating from ITE in 2002.

"Because of my weak knowledge, I didn't understand what I was doing," he recalled.

"I just memorised things to pass tests and had a really hard time understanding the complex systems there."

Whenever he was lost and confused, his supervisor would guide

him. "I felt so ashamed because I went through proper training in ITE with textbooks, unlike my supervisor in his 50s who had no qualifications," said Mr Yang.

"But my supervisor knew everything – he first started out as an apprentice and then learnt bit by bit."

That experience made Mr Yang determined to improve himself. "I

DIDN'T ENJOY LEARNING

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MR JOSEPH YANG, on taking education for granted when he was younger.

wanted to give myself one more chance to really learn."

Mr Yang plunged back into education and enrolled part-time in Singapore Polytechnic.

While studying, he also worked as a technical officer with SMRT to support his single-parent family.

"It was definitely tough. I had to have a strong reason for wanting to do this," he said. "This time, I didn't have any academic targets to hit. All I wanted to do was learn."

Mr Yang did well enough in polytechnic that in 2013, he got a place in a part-time degree course at NUS, where he balanced work in the day and school at night.

"It was very tiring. Sometimes I would partially fall asleep in class but I had to keep myself awake or I would miss out on information," he recalled.

Throughout his four years at NUS, Mr Yang was on the Dean's List for exceptional students.

His attitude to lifelong learning even inspired his colleagues, some of whom have taken extra courses to brush up their own skills.

But the greatest joy for Mr Yang, who is married, must be inspiring his brother, Mr Yang Yaoguang, 30, who also graduated from the same course.

"I pulled him along with me and I told him to come to NUS, because he had nothing to lose anyway.

"Both of us went the long way, but we put in the effort and now we see we have gained so much."

Sue-Ann Tan