



DISCRIMINATION

I believe education is important, but it shouldn't get to a point where people discriminate you totally in life just because of your education background.



MR NICHOLAS OOI, on unkind remarks about his ITE education.

Mr Nicholas Ooi, who earned an honours degree in computing from NUS, with his parents, Mr Ooi Kean Cheong and Ms Anna Sim, at the university's graduation ceremony last Friday. ST PHOTO: ZHANG XUAN

Techie takes long road to an honours degree

He went from Normal Tech student to NUS grad after finding course that fulfils IT dream

Fabian Koh

Driven by a dream that started at the age of eight, Mr Nicholas Ooi embarked on a long journey through Singapore's education system.

He passed through EM3 in primary school, Normal (Technical) in secondary school and then the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), before entering a polytechnic.

On Friday, Mr Ooi, 28, graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) with an honours degree in computing.

"Since the age of eight, I have had a passion for computing. When I first played Red Alert (a military strategy game) and saw the graphics, it gave me the idea of going further to discover what computing was about," he said.

Mr Ooi was not interested in what he was studying in primary

school, and spent most of his time playing computer games. "It got to a point where it was distracting me from my studies," he said.

From Clementi North Primary School he transferred to West View Primary School in Primary 4 when his family moved to Johor Baru. They lived there until he was a Secondary 3 student in Assumption English Secondary School.

He said he had to wake up at 3.30am to reach school by 7.30am. "I was late most of the time, and got a lot of feedback from teachers."

Mr Ooi's father, courier Ooi Kean Chong, 64, said they had moved across the Causeway to save on living costs. He is Singaporean, while his wife, Ms Anna Sim, a 55-year-old housewife, and his son are permanent residents. The family now lives in a four-room Housing Board flat in Bukit Panjang.

"I'm very proud of him," said Mr

Ooi of his only child. "He worked very hard to get to where he is today, and he has done excellently."

The turning point for his son came when he found a course he wanted to do. Before that, he was not interested in school though Mr Ooi and his wife have always encouraged him. "He has loved IT since he was young. It's very unusual for someone to set their mind so firmly on something from such an age," he added.

At ITE College West (Balestier Campus), the younger Mr Ooi pursued a Nitec in information and communication technologies.

There, he took part in IT competitions such as Java Jive, where his team defeated competitors from polytechnics and universities here.

Mr Ooi also started experimenting on his own outside of the school curriculum, creating a blackjack computer game and coming up with a



Mr Nicholas Ooi (seated) and NUS mates (from left) Janelle Lee, Han Lynn and Joshua Foong started social enterprise Bantu, which uses technology to manage volunteers in the social service sector. PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

platform to play music from iTunes on his computer. He went on to Ngee Ann Poly's School of InfoComm Technology and created in his first year a company called Towards Technology, which provided Web design services. "I wanted to create

real projects for real clients, and put into practice what I learnt," he said.

The start-up cost of \$500 was paid from his own pocket. He later got two partners on board as the workload increased. The business had about 15 clients, and made

about \$15,000 over five years, before it faded away as the trio entered national service and could not dedicate time to it.

Mr Ooi was no less enterprising at NUS, co-founding Bantu, a social enterprise which uses technology to manage volunteers in the social service sector in Singapore.

The idea for Bantu came after Mr Ooi's NUS Overseas College (NOC) stint in California's Silicon Valley during his second year of university. With co-founders Janelle Lee, 25, Joshua Foong, 26, and Han Lynn, 25, Mr Ooi, Bantu's chief executive officer, developed the platform to manage volunteers.

Mr Foong, who did his NOC stint in New York, observed that some volunteer managers in the United States found it hard to communicate with volunteers.

Added Mr Ooi: "Retaining the volunteers was also a crucial challenge, so we decided to focus on the volunteering ecosystem."

After a year of discussion, the quartet got \$10,000 seed money from NUS Enterprise, which promotes entrepreneurship and innovation in the university. They spent the next year checking if the same problem exists here, and building a prototype for the platform.

Since its launch in April, Bantu has signed up 15 organisations, including Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centre and Over The Rainbow, which promotes mental wellness among youth.

Looking back on his education journey, Mr Ooi said the biggest challenge was the social stigma he faced. "Sometimes, when I was outside in my school uniform, some strangers would say loudly, 'I will never want to enter ITE. Look at them, they are thugs'," he said.

He said: "I believe education is important, but it shouldn't get to a point where people discriminate you totally in life just because of your education background."

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