

From ITE to NUS medicine: Ex-dropout makes the grade

23-year-old, who had quit secondary school, is first ITE grad to be accepted by med school

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

The long shot has come good.

Mr Nicholas Chan, 23, is the first Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduate to make it to the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, which this year had about 280 places for some 2,000 applicants.

Far from being a straight-A student, he had quit secondary school, taken the O levels as a private candidate, then trained as a nursing student in ITE, and then Nanyang Poly-

technic (NYP).

"I freaked out and I lost it," said Mr Chan, when he logged on to the admissions portal for universities earlier this month to check if his application was successful. He even took a video of himself clicking "yes" to the offer that night, just because he could not believe that he had been accepted.

His application to the medical school last year was rejected.

"I was just being realistic. I'm far from the best person to apply. I knew it was a long shot, and to get it was really unreal."

The younger of two brothers had



Mr Nicholas Chan frequently played truant when he was a student at Bishan Park Secondary School and eventually quit studies there. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

frequently played truant when he was at Bishan Park Secondary.

"I would wear my school uniform when leaving home, then change into my home clothes and go to a LAN shop or cyber cafe," he said.

He failed most of his subjects, slept during exams and was so uninterested that he eventually dropped out of school in the third year.

"I was very short-sighted then... and it was very difficult for my parents. They were strict, but my brother and I were very stubborn."

His father is a financial consultant and his mother a housewife.

Yet, playful as he was, he always entertained thoughts of being a nurse or a doctor so he could help people, partly because of his grandmother who had taken care of him when he was sick as a child.

So he worked out a plan to get into ITE by taking three O-level subjects – English, English literature and mathematics – as a private candidate. He also volunteered at organisations like Dover Park Hospice to experience clinical work.

"The moment I entered ITE, I told myself this was my last chance to redeem myself." He did well in ITE with a grade point average of 3.65, qualifying for NYP's nursing course. He graduated last year in May with a near-perfect GPA of 3.91 out of 4.

At the same time, he mulled over the thought of applying to medical school. "I wanted more knowledge about medicine and have more say in how I could treat patients," he said. So in his third year of polytechnic, he decided to take the A levels on his own so that he could have extra credentials.

"I had not heard of nursing students making it to study medicine," he said. His A-level results were not the best: He had an A for General Paper but failed mathematics.

But he submitted them to NUS through its Exceptional Individual Scheme to support his nursing

RIGHT ATTITUDE

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MRS MAE TANG, ITE's course manager for nursing, on her former student.

diploma, along with lecturers' testimonials, and hoped for the best. The scheme lets the university use its discretion and look beyond just academic results in admitting a small number of students.

His father, Mr Ryan Chan, 59, said: "One of the biggest fears and emotional burdens for a parent must be that you supported your child's bold or perhaps impulsive decision at a very tender age, at a critical juncture of his life, and it may not be the right path, and one would not know for many years out."

"We were extremely worried when he left secondary school, but Nicholas strove incredibly hard, on his own initiative, to do all the right things in his academics, work and volunteerism too, which brought him his dream university acceptance."

Mrs Mae Tang, ITE's course manager for nursing, said her former student's nursing experience will give him a good head start in medicine. "He's very genuine, inquisitive and he kept his teachers on their toes with his out-of-the-box questions."

Mr Chan said: "A lot of things could have gone wrong, but ITE took me in, lecturers looked out for me," he said. "Words can't express how grateful I am that NUS accepted me."

ateng@sph.com.sg

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<http://str.sg/nicholaschan>