

GARAGE

Student-led start-up merges study and play

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REMEMBER choose-your-own-adventure books or the multi-player online game Club Penguin? Local educational technology start-up LevelUp World hopes to use these as models for a smarter and more enjoyable mode of learning for children under the age of 12.

Since its inception in 2019, LevelUp has managed to secure some S\$100,000 in equity-free funding from competitions and grants, such as Oxford's Incubator and the European Young Innovator Award in 2020.

The company's founders are all students, with three under-graduates and one post-graduate student.

They were most recently awarded the "best undergraduate idea" at Oxford Foundry's flagship All-Innovate start-up pitching competition.

The founders' backgrounds span

politics, philosophy and economics (PPE), law, computing and educational psychology, with each of them having a strong enterprising spirit.

For example, chief executive officer Nicholas U Jin previously founded a start-up for beach shorts inspired by his dog's coat of fur.

Joel Yap, who puts his coding and programming expertise to the test as the team's chief technological officer, used to attend hackathons at least once a month. He would sign up without a team to meet like-minded people and ideate.

But being entrepreneurs while juggling the demands of school is no easy feat, as Mr U Jin, a law student at Oxford University, shared.

"Starting a venture is different from just throwing around ideas. We have a real responsibility to the rest of our team and parents who are using our platforms to make decisions for their child," he said.

"Some would say I have no college life, but it has been very fulfilling to

make my own decisions and work with the team on such a meaningful idea," he added.

"A start-up is like work, but work you really, really enjoy and you're really passionate about," said Mr Yap, a computing major from National University of Singapore (NUS).

"School is important, but when you are committed to your start-up and creating a good product, you have to go at it 100 per cent."

The team's chief education officer Patricia Vlad specialised in educational psychology during her undergraduate studies at Cambridge University and now focuses on edutech and psychology for her post-graduate studies.

The founding team had initially met at a hedge fund to develop a trading strategy, a golden opportunity to some. "But eventually, we realised that finance was not quite the fix for us," said Aqil Faruq B Fared, chief finance officer of LevelUp and PPE major at Yale-NUS University.

"Many of us had grown up staring at video game screens rather than stock tickers, and we also shared a passion in personalising education based on the power of data today. That drove us to start LevelUp," said Mr Aqil.

In Mr Yap's view, one's schooling years are perhaps the best time to explore and venture into start-ups.

"As university students, we are not working full-time so we can jump into different fields and try new things," he said.

In May, LevelUp launched their minimum viable product, a psychometric profiling portal for children, and are currently working towards a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) platform.

These will allow young learners, mainly aged six to 12, to better understand their learning habits, areas for growth and how to maximise their potential.

According to the founding team, this group of learners were most af-



LevelUp World founders (from left) Aqil Faruq, 24; Patricia Vlad, 29; Joel Yap, 24; and Nicholas U Jin, 24, believe in the power of education and technology. BT PHOTO: GIN TAY

fected by the pandemic-induced shift to home-based learning.

Yet, despite the technology available and the limited effectiveness of online lectures, there has been a certain reluctance for educators to adopt gamified learning solutions.

"Being avid gamers ourselves, we have seen the power of MMORPG in social and educational opportunities, we want to present learning experiences in a way that's personalised and

meaningful to the learner", Mr Aqil said.

They said that the pandemic has illuminated the potential of edutech, as learning experiences shift online and geographical limits blur.

Ms Vlad said: "All of us believe in the power of education. We want to respond to society's emerging edutech needs, and re-educate parents and educators to nurture young learners' natural inclinations."