

Informatics' long, hard road to recovery



BY JANE NG

FOREIGN student Ayesha Erasmus is studying for a mass communications degree at Informatics, a private school here, but her parents back in India can access a report on her progress every term.

It is all online — her grades, her attendance, and what her lecturers say about her.

Not that the 19-year-old minds. She says of her parents: "They're paying so much for my education that they have a right to know how I'm faring."

This progress report, which the school introduced three months ago, is Informatics' "insurance" against students who feign ignorance about how they are doing and make allegations against the school, said chief executive Val Ortega.

He cited as an example a report in this newspaper three weeks ago about two China students who are suing the school, saying they were unaware that they had failed to earn their diplomas in 2001.

They continued paying course fees to an errant former staff member, it is claimed — attending classes all the way to their "masters programme" last year.

Said Mr Ortega: "Such a claim could never be made today. Our system is totally transparent and students know exactly where they stand."

The e-report card is among a slew of measures the new board has put in place to turn the school around since it was embroiled in an accounting scandal in 2004.

Founder Wong Tai and former chief executive Ong Boon Kheng were charged with overstating profits.

Wong, who pleaded guilty, was fined \$240,000 on Sept 1; Ong is

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INFORMATICS CEO VAL ORTEGA (left), on what the school is doing to regain public trust after it was embroiled in an accounting scandal in 2004

PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

still on trial. The end is in sight for the case, but the new management has a long road ahead to repair the school's battered image, said Mr Ortega.

The school has not regained the confidence of the public, he added, saying that though recruitment figures bounced back to pre-scandal levels within six months, he expected more to sign up.

Mr Ortega, an Informatics veteran in the classroom, as well as in its administration, emerged from retirement in 2002 to take up various positions in the school. He became the school's acting chief executive in April, and its chief executive, two months ago.

But rather than focus on buffing up the school's public image, he decided more shine was needed in the way the school was run.

This included shifting the organisation from a business-driven model to one that focuses on education.

The 59-year-old chief, who was refreshingly candid about the setbacks faced by the school, said in his usual straightforward manner: "Education comes first. Profits are the result of providing a good education."

He ditched a management team run by business people for one run by experienced educators. Everyone on the team now has over a decade's worth of teaching experience.

His next task: Bringing the school back to its mainstay of offering post-secondary level courses.

He has spring-cleaned the course offerings. Courses in "hot" areas, such as gaming and animation, hospitality and tourism management, and networks and cybersecurity, were introduced, while the school's new O-level through-train programme, which took students to a degree by bypassing the O levels, was thrown out.

He declared: "When nurs-

ing yourself back to health, you can't try to carry weights at the same time. You have to focus on the things you do best and do them even better."

Next, he looked to the well-being of the students.

The school, which operates out of a refurbished, 60,000 sq m campus in Jurong East, now runs co-curricular activities, such as those found in mainstream schools.

Students take their pick from enrichment modules covering subjects such as the fine arts, sports and yoga. And to prep graduates for the working world, classes in PC maintenance and career development are available.

Students new to the school, or Singapore, have the services of a student concierge, who can help out with details ranging from finding accommodation to figuring out public transport and where to buy phone cards.

Other little extras include a computer games room, PCs installed all over the campus so students can surf the Net for free, and "print stations", where students can print their projects.

Mr Ortega fully realises that turning the school around is a long-haul process — one made tougher due to the serious competition the school is up against, as the Government develops Singapore as an education hub, aiming for 150,000 foreign students by 2012.

"In the past, private schools were just tuition centres preparing students for external exams. But we're now part of the Singapore education hub," he noted.

He takes pride in saying that the school now develops its own curriculum, and has even developed its own internal and external exams board, "running much like a mini-Ministry of Education".

Academic standards will be maintained — which

means that students who do not pass their modules run the risk of being kicked out.

This will mean a loss of fee revenue, but, says Mr Ortega: "We will aim to maintain standards. Having students who stay the distance will translate into dollars and cents eventually, so I'm not worried about that."

Changes are still unfolding.

Nine months ago, he introduced an electronic attendance-tracking system. Before entering a class, students flash their identity passes at a screening machine, which captures and stores their personal data and course information.

Tardy ones who show up more than 30 minutes late for class are marked absent.

This new system has eliminated disputes over whether the student has missed a class or whether a lecturer has missed taking his attendance, said Mr Ortega.

It also provides the school administration with at-a-glance information on frequent absentees.

Students such as Mutari Ishak, a 24-year-old Nigerian, say they have been more punctual for classes since the system was introduced.

Consumers Association of Singapore chief Seah Seng Choon hails it as "fantastic" and an unusual feature for a private school.

"It's definitely a step in the right direction. If more schools were to follow suit, it would enhance the image of the education industry," he said.

Mr Ortega plans to take the school's best practices to its 138 centres and 16,000 students abroad.

"This is not going to be the end. We need to work doubly hard to regain confidence, because public perception will be affected by the ongoing trial.

"I remind my staff to get the basics right — we're educators first. Talk less, get the basics right. Talk too much, and it just becomes hype," he said.

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