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ELECTRIC LEARNING

Shy? Busy? Slow to learn?

That's why Vince Woo, who says he's all of the above, feels getting a degree online is ideal for him

By Veena Bharwani

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MR Vince Woo (right) is very shy.

This used to leave the 25-year-old software development engineer paralysed whenever he had to ask something in class.

'I didn't want the attention of other students. I just felt like they thought I was stupid for asking questions,' recalled Mr Woo, who is now pursuing a part-time science degree in computing.

But, now, he no longer hesitates to raise questions in class.

That's because his classmates and lecturers can't see him!

He's doing an online degree through PurpleTrain.com, the e-learning arm of private school Informatics.

The degree programme (Bachelor of Science in Computing with Honours), which must be completed in three years, is provided by the University of Portsmouth in Britain.

Mr Woo, who started the degree in October 2003, said that the best thing about the online degree is its flexibility.

'When I started, I was a signaller in NS and there were times I would be out of the country for a whole month.'

'With this course, I would come back after a long absence, go online and catch up by reading the discussions on the online forums.'

Now that he's working, the flexible nature of the course is even more useful.

'I work long hours and there are days when I miss the sessions.

'But I don't lose out as I can just log on any time and not lag behind the rest.'

CHAT SESSIONS

Mr Woo reads the course content for each module and then participates in chat sessions conducted by course facilitators, who are lecturers from or approved by the university.

There are three chat sessions per module, where facilitators will discuss the topics and answer students' questions.

If he misses out on the sessions, he can read up on them later as all discussions are posted online.

If he is still unclear about the topic, he can post a question on the discussion forum, which will be answered by the facilitator within 48 hours.

Another thing he likes about the course is that he can tailor it to his learning speed.

'I'm a very slow learner, that's why I'm just doing one module at a time.

'But if you are a fast learner, you can bypass all the basic stuff and go on to the more challenging parts,' said Mr Woo, who is averaging Bs for the course.

Still, he admits that the lack of human interaction has been a problem.

'It's not easy to follow the online discussions as we are used to listening to someone explaining concepts rather than reading it on the computer.'

He said that it can get frustrating during a chat session, where everyone is typing out their questions all at once.

'It's very messy and hard to follow sometimes as it's unlike a normal classroom, where when one person speaks, everyone else listens.

'Here, you can't see your classmates.'

He added that even asking questions and expressing yourself online can be trying.

'Sometimes the facilitator doesn't understand your question and you have to repeat yourself several times.'

FRUSTRATING

Mr Woo said if he posts his question on the discussion forum, it can be days of back-and-forth e-mail exchange before he gets an answer.

Still, taking the virtual degree has made him more disciplined.

'It's very easy to go home after a long day's work and say, 'Forget it, I'm too tired to do work.' There is no one monitoring you.

'But, in this course, you just have to be persistent.'

Private schools attract more poly, uni grads

BEFORE it was a turf that mostly only O-level graduates touched.

But soon private schools will attract a more learned crowd - adults with degrees and polytechnic diplomas.

This was according to a survey on continuing education in Singapore conducted by SPH's Marketing Planning and Development Department (Research).

Of the 1,209 surveyed, 253 working adults (or 21 per cent) plan to take up courses in private schools in the next three years.

Of this group, 64 per cent are degree and diploma holders.

'This means that students will be more demanding in terms of the quality of teachers and courses, as they are more sophisticated than the previous students, who were mostly O- and A-level graduates,' said the assistant vice-president of the department, Dr Lee Gek Choon.

She presented the survey results at a Further Education Seminar on 13 May.

MORE JOB CONFIDENCE

Dr Lee, who spoke to over 100 attendees from the private education business, added that a whopping 86 per cent who want to take up courses think they would give them greater job confidence, whereas only 44 per cent do it for financial gains.

The print media is the most popular source when it comes to obtaining information on courses, with 41 per cent relying on newspapers for the information.

The survey, which was done to help private schools better understand their students' needs, also revealed the average amount students spend on courses (\$5,455) and which private schools come to their minds first.

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