

# Those who didn't ace A levels, take heart

Many students have gone on to get good degrees at private schools or gained entry to local universities via poly route, say principals and lecturers

## Amelia Tan

That road trip to a university degree does not hit a wall if one does not do well at the A levels, educators said.

Many A-level students, having failed to get a place at the local universities, have gone on to get good degrees at private schools here.

Others, after doing well in polytechnic diploma courses, secured spots at the local universities.

These other routes were highlighted by junior college principals and polytechnic and private school lecturers.

Private schools such as SIM Global Education (SIM GE) offer overseas degree programmes with reputable universities and institutions from countries like the United States, Britain, Australia and Switzerland.

More A-level graduates have

been applying for their courses in recent years.

Dr Or Lay Tin, academic head of the University of London (UOL) programmes at SIM GE, said 1,200 students – about 40 per cent – of those who enrolled on its UOL programmes last year were A-level holders.

UOL programme students make up almost half of the 19,500 students at SIM GE.

Dr Or said she had noticed that many of these A-level holders shine once they embark on their degree courses.

Out of the 92 UOL graduates who bagged first-class honours last year, 34 had taken A levels.

Dr Or said: "Judging from the success of these students, we can see that the A levels should not be seen as the only indicator of a student's future academic success."

She added that SIM GE graduates

have carved out successful careers at international firms like ABN Amro, Standard Chartered Bank and UBS.

Some went on to do post-graduate studies at places like the University of Hong Kong, the London School of Economics and Oxford University.

Pioneer Junior College (PJC) principal Tan-Kek Lee Yong said she discourages her students from repeating their A levels.

A handful of PJC students take their A levels again each year. Most who do so had faced issues such as emotional problems in their second year.

Mrs Tan-Kek said the school found that this small group tends to do well at the second A-level attempt.

She added that there are students who "do not do well in their A levels because they may not be suited for this route".

"When these students repeat their A levels, they do only marginally better, like an improvement of one grade. My teachers and I would advise them to pursue other options, and there are many other choices."

Mr Paul Yap, Temasek Polytechnic's aviation management and services course manager, said four of the 79 students who graduated from his course last year were A-level holders.

These four students, who were in the top 20 per cent of their batch, have gone on to get places at the local universities or signed up with the Republic of Singapore Air Force.

Mr Yap added that he finds A-level students have a leg-up because they have acquired problem-solving and analytical skills at their junior colleges, are more mature as they are older, and may have covered as part of their A levels some of the topics taught at the polytechnics.

"Importantly, many A-level holders do well because they made the first step to changing their lives. Many see this as a second shot and they do not want to waste the opportunity," he said.

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Mr Bay, who got C, C and E for his A levels, now works at one of the big four accounting firms.

## First-class honours for local university reject

The lowest point in Mr Bay Weisheng's life came several years ago when he tore open his A-level results slip.

His grades? C, C and E.

Still, he applied to study business and accountancy at the local universities – and was rejected.

Now aged 25, he said: "My friends were getting accepted into the courses they applied to

but I kept getting rejections. The feeling was so bad, I did not know what to do."

The answer came during his national service stint.

"I had a lot of time to think during those two years and I told myself I should not give up. I had to continue my studies and I started looking at options," he said.

He decided to take up the

University of London accounting and finance course offered at SIM Global Education, a move that paid off when he graduated with first-class honours last year. He now works as an auditor at one of the big four accounting firms.

Mr Bay, who once had his share of red marks in exams at his alma mater St Andrew's Junior College, maintained a straight-A track record during his degree course.

"I would study for 12 hours straight in my school's library. I knew this was my second shot and I should not waste it. So I wanted to give it all that I had," he said.

## No regrets about going to poly

When Mr Jonathan Oh, 24, decided to enrol at Singapore Polytechnic (SP) after he did not do well in his A levels, many of his friends told him he was taking "a step back".

He was unswayed in his choice of SP's diploma programme in chemical engineering and, three years on, he has not regretted his decision.

He will graduate next month with an outstanding cumulative grade point average of 3.7 out of a possible 4.0.

Next in his sights? The chemical and biological engineering course at Nanyang Technological University.

Mr Oh, who was from Pioneer Junior College, remembers the anguish and



Mr Oh admits he was distracted while in junior college, but found his focus at Singapore Polytechnic where he secured a grade point average of 3.7.

disappointment of getting straight Ds at the A levels.

But he felt he had only himself to blame as he was distracted by his commitments as captain of his school badminton team and his avid interest in basketball.

"I was going through the motions in school. When I was in class, I was not paying attention," said Mr Oh.

During his national service, he had the chance to rebuild his confidence through leadership positions.

"I started thinking about my future. Since I did not do well at the A levels, it would not be good to pursue a degree immediately. So I felt the poly route was a good one," he said.

Going overseas was not an option as his cashier mother and teacher father could not afford the school fees.

It is at SP that he studies the hardest and pays attention during all his lessons.

"I think when you are focused and you have a goal in mind, you will do well," said Mr Oh.