

NEWS FEATURE

Starting up young

Once thought risk-averse and exam-obsessed, more youths are becoming serious entrepreneurs while still in school. Why?

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SINGAPORE – In Secondary 1, he set up, just for kicks, a Bulletin Board System — a primitive form of a content-sharing forum during the early days of the World Wide Web — which became so popular that the 13-year-old was drawing more than S\$300 every month from advertising revenue.

Mr Zave Huang went about growing his little business empire in earnest, from building websites for companies to designing accounting software, all in his teen years. And four years ago, fresh out of university, he embarked on his latest venture, a mobile phone software firm.

Even as calls are being made for more to be done to spur entrepreneurship — most recently by former top civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow, speaking at a National University of Singapore (NUS) event last month — there is already a healthy number of young Singaporeans, like Mr Huang, who aren't waiting until they graduate to start their own enterprises.

It's a sign that the paper chase isn't all that consumes students today, but also of an ecosystem that is perhaps encouraging greater experimentation and independence.

MORE READY MONEY

Mr Tan Yan Liang, a 24-year-old NUS mechanical engineering undergrad who co-founded FiETT — which is rolling out tactile gloves for use with touchscreen devices — sums up sentiments thus: "I have no liabilities now, so there's nothing to worry about. If I don't now, then when? If I fail, I can just treat it as a learning journey."

Mr Keith Tan, 23, says students have "the lowest opportunity costs to start a business". The second-year architecture student at NUS launched Start Now, a social enterprise that links volunteers to non-profit organisations, in February.

But this conviction has taken hold also because more financiers are, in recent years, availing themselves to start-ups founded by youths — thereby greatly lowering what is typically the age group's greatest hurdle to starting a business: Funds.

An abundance of money is being made available, with grants doled out by SPRING Singapore (Young Entrepreneurs Scheme for Start-ups; since replaced by the Action Community for Entrepreneurship scheme), generous prize money in the dozen or so student

business plan competitions, and funds from angel investors.

This addresses another common conundrum for young entrepreneurs: Parents being anxious about the children being saddled with debt should their ventures fail.

That doesn't mean there are zero risks. They still must sink in their own money for matching grants, or find more personal sources, like Mr Elliot Lin, who ran a chauffeur-driven limousine business while studying at the Singapore Management University. On top of S\$16,000 of his own savings, he borrowed about S\$4,000 from his parents for the initial outlay.

GENERATION WITH FEWER WORRIES

Mr Brendan Goh, 25, who graduated only last month from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and has co-founded a company in the midst of developing a 3D plastic printer, says this generation is "blessed" with the leeway to experiment in business. "Our parents have some money; won't starve; have a roof over their heads, so we don't have to worry as much about providing for them."

In Mr Huang's case, he had to take over his father's small petrochemical trading company when he was in his sophomore year, after his dad passed away. After about a year, he sold the firm and his mother is living off the proceeds.

Others point to "excellent" support systems. The universities run incubators and organise business-matching networking sessions, as well as provide mentors to student start-ups.

There are also internships to be had with start-ups in hot spots from Silicon Valley to Shanghai and Israel under an NUS programme, for instance.

Indeed, the entrepreneurship milieu has evolved in recognition, and support, of the trend of younger entrepreneurs. In 2009, for example, the Government amended the Civil Law Act to lower the minimum age of contractual capacity from 21 to 18, to remove "unnecessary restrictions on young people wishing to do business".

'YOU'RE TOO YOUNG'

Yet, despite all the help, some problems peculiar to young bosses remain: Some clients discriminate against them due to their age, staff — especially older ones — challenge their authority and, obviously, there is the challenge of juggling schoolwork and business.

Mr Roy Wang, 25, who runs creative agency Coalition and art-and-design studio Factory 16 11, recalls how he lost out on contracts when he was starting out — even when potential clients favoured his work over a competitor's. They pulled out upon



When Mr Roy Wang — who runs a creative agency and art-and-design studio — started out, some potential clients who liked his work pulled out when they learnt his age.
 PHOTO GOI BOONKEONG

learning his age when they met in person, he says.

The recent graduate of NTU's School of Art, Design & Media quipped: "That's why I don't shave my moustache now!"

Mr Lin, who on top of his limo business recently started a new company organising networking activities for young working executives, said getting some of his older drivers to respect him can be challenging. "Sometimes, they even start teaching you how to run your business."

Once, an older worker three days into his job asked him for a salary advance and Mr Lin succumbed. But the worker didn't show up after pocketing the money and, when he was sacked, even threatened to get gangsters to go after Mr Lin.

EXAMS ON A PRAYER

Having to manage your studies while trying to grow your business is tough, recalls FiETT's other founder Charmain Tan.

The 22-year-old fresh graduate from NUS' statistics course said she scrapped through many an exam by "doing last-minute studying and praying damn hard".

But she and others reject the perception that our education system gets in the way of youths' forays into enterprise. "You just have to learn how to manage your time properly," she said, a point proven by several student entrepreneurs TODAY spoke to.

Also, there is the doubt that creeps in because of peer pressure. Said FiETT's Fitzkhoo Liang, 24: "You see your peers having nice jobs, fixed incomes, big cars, and you may ask yourself, 'What am I doing?'"

Mr Goh added that the "Asian mindset" doesn't help matters. In Western cultures, parents expect the children to move out when they reach 18 and practically leave them to fend for themselves.

Mr Ng Boon Chin, 25, who recently graduated and is starting an online photo-sharing venture, expounded upon this: "In Silicon Valley, they say that if you haven't failed, you have no experience. Here, the fear of failure is ingrained in our psyche."

START OUT PREPARED

These folks are confident that their experiences will stand them in good stead, even if their current ventures fail. For one, practical lessons picked up, such as having to make quick decisions, would give them an edge should they, say, join the corporate race later, argue Mr Goh and Mr Lin.

But Mr Ng cautioned that entrepreneurship is not all glamour nor a breeze. "You have to come in with your eyes open. Without understanding the hardships that you will face, you will drop out," said the founder of Ubersnap. "Don't just think of the end-goal; that you will make millions or become the next Mark Zuckerberg. Think of the journey: 'Am I prepared to go through it?'"

Some years back, Ms Tan had envisioned setting up a kiosk selling all things related to eggs — but all her friends told her it was not a feasible business idea. So she held back. Months later, she read in a magazine about an egg-themed cafe. "That taught me a lesson — people may tell you you're crazy, but just do it if you truly believe in your idea," she said.

*** RISE OF THE STUDENT ENTREPRENEUR**

● Nearly 80 per cent of students have given some thought to founding their own business, says the latest Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' Survey, conducted by the NUS Entrepreneurship Centre last year.

● The NUS Enterprise Incubator, which has helped more than 90 incubatee companies, has seen a slight increase in the number of students seeking support.