

Publication: Vulcan Post Online

Date: 24 January 2018

Headline: He Singlehandedly Tutors 200 Students A Year - Rewards Good Grades With Air Tickets, iPads

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Given the kiasu (Singlish for ‘scared to lose’) mentality that Singaporeans have been brought up with, it’s no surprise that the tuition industry is burgeoning.

From large scale operations like multi-location tuition centres, to private tutors that operate as independent agents, parents are always on the lookout for the most effective way to salvage their children’s grades.

In fact, it was reported in The Straits Times at end 2016 that tuition is worth more than a billion dollars annually, with parents spending “several hundred or thousands” on classes monthly.

While school syllabi have undergone tweaks and overhauls over the years, one thing remains constant – how the average student dreads tuition time.

Usually held after a long, weary day at school, the heavy feeling that came with heading to my tutor’s house and knowing that I was going to leave with more homework is something I’m sure every tuition-going student can relate to.

Eugene Toh (29), a Singaporean tutor and founder of Economics at TuitionGenius (ETG) tuition centre, believes that tuition doesn’t need to be such a dread for students, and is offering them some awesome perks as a form of encouragement.



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Part of the pantry

From a pantry stocked with snacks, to McDonald's for breakfast, to plane tickets as a reward for good grades – Eugene is on his way to making tuition not just enriching, but enjoyable as well.

And with screenshots of students thanking him for their A grades, to a seemingly endless list of positive testimonials – this approach is definitely working.

Teaching Since His National Service Days

As a student, Eugene admits that Economics was a subject that he enjoyed because it enabled him to understand more about the world, “why things happen the way they do, and the impact of government policy and trade-offs”.

He credits his deep interest in the subject to his Economics teachers in Junior College, and how they made concepts easy to understand and ensured that the students were their priority.

“[It was then that] I knew that Economics was what I wanted to do in university, so I later went on to major in Economics at NUS.”

He recently graduated from Singapore Management University (SMU) with a Masters degree in Economics.

However, even before he stepped foot into university as an undergraduate, he was already teaching Economics tuition as he served National Service.

“The very first iteration of Economics at TuitionGenius was in 2007,” he shares.



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“A typical weekday would be 8am – 5.30pm serving NS, and [after] I book out, my first lesson may start at 6.30pm or 7pm and I would end at around 10 or 10.30pm.”

On weekends, I could start at 8am and end at 10pm. I worked like crazy.

“I came from an extremely humble family background, and due to my financial hardship, my officer-in-charge and commanding officer in the army granted me special permission to work after office hours.”

To clinch his first batch of students, Eugene, with the help of his friend, had to manually slot flyers at every HDB block at Choa Chu Kang, Bukit Batok, and Jurong East, in hopes that they'll find a need for his Economics tuition.

Fortunately, his marketing efforts paid off, and he went from private one-to-one sessions to group sessions, as more and more heard about him via word-of-mouth.



Image Credit: Eugene Toh

From teaching at group discussion rooms at Jurong East library and his own flat, he has since singlehandedly grown the brand over the years and now runs 2 tuition centres of his own – one in Choa Chu Kang, and the other at Coronation Plaza.

There are also plans to run a class from his home at Jurong West for JC2 students this year.

Flying Solo Since 2007

Eugene estimates that around 200 students are taught at ETG every year, and while that's believable for a centre of this scale, what's unbelievable is that all the students are taught by him, and him alone!

“Economics at TuitionGenius only has a sole tutor since 2007,” he chirped.

But why not hire more, so that he can focus on the business aspect of things, and also have more personal time?

I'd love to hire more teachers but there are a few issues – the branding is currently built around my personal branding as a tutor.

“Next, I find it hard to focus, if I had to split my time between managing tutors and teaching itself. My personal expectations of how each lesson is conducted is quite hard to meet too.”

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MONDAY	CCK JC2 (H1 Class) 8.00pm - 10.00pm	FRIDAY	Bt.Timah JC2 (HCI & NY Class) 5.30pm - 7.30pm (BT) JC2 7.30pm - 9.30pm (BT)
TUESDAY	Jurong.West JC2 5.30pm - 7.30pm (JW)	SATURDAY	CCK/Bt.Timah JC1 1.00pm - 3.00pm (BT) JC2 10.00am - 12.00pm (CCK) 3.00pm - 5.00pm (BT)
WEDNESDAY	Bt.Timah JC2 3.30pm - 5.30pm (BT) 5.30pm - 7.30pm (BT) JC1 7.30pm - 9.30pm (BT)	SUNDAY	CCK JC1 10.00am - 12.00pm (CCK) JC2 12.00pm - 2.00pm (CCK) 2.00pm - 4.00pm (CCK)
THURSDAY	CCK/Bt.Timah JC 2 5.30pm - 7.30pm (CCK) JC 2 (HCI & NY Class) 7.30pm - 9.30pm (BT)		

Class schedule at ETG, Monday classes have since been removed

With 15 classes to teach over the 7 days of the week, the hectic schedule had inevitably taken a toll on his health.

I've had this persistent headache for the last 2.5 years and I've been living off Panadol on a daily basis. "I went to see a neurologist thinking that perhaps I have a tumour. My neurologist later gave me a clean bill of health after some MRI scans. It turns out, the solution was quite simple – take a day off work every week instead of working 7 days a week."

"After I started taking a day off, the headaches lessened significantly."

Thus, since August last year, Mondays are his days off.

A self-professed workaholic, he gets home at around 10pm every day, and after freshening up and spending some time with his young son, gets straight back to work – this time, via Whatsapp consultation sessions with his students.



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"It is easier to do something that you are both passionate about and can be competent in it," he admits.

Air Tickets, Vouchers, And iPads In Exchange For Hard Work

In spite of his hectic work schedule, he insists that JC students are actually leading even more stressful lives than him.

"They wake up at 6am everyday, and have to deal with so many classes...have to go for CCA, and also maintain a social life. It is hard to do well in all the subjects when you have so much on your plate!"

Thus, he takes it heavily upon himself to ease their stress by at least making Economics less of a pain point for them.



Image Credit: Eugene Toh

Since I have that only one job, and my students (sometimes their parents) have entrusted me to help them with the subject – the least I can do, is to do everything in my power to them understand it better! To encourage his students, Eugene is very generous with perks and rewards for good grades.

For example, all students get free one-to-one consultations, additional resources in the form of Economics news articles daily, and even occasional treats in class like Krispy Kreme donuts, KOI bubble tea, Starbucks coffee, and McDonald's breakfasts!

Prizes for quarterly tests, held throughout the year, also include air tickets to Greece, Korea and Bangkok, iPads, tickets to Universal Studios Singapore, Kindle e-readers, and even movie and book vouchers!

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PRIZES FOR
1ST QUARTERLY
TEST:

TOP PRIZE:
IPAD MINI
QIAN ZIHAN,
RVHS

2ND PRIZE:
\$100 STARBUCKS
CARD
TAI JIA HUI, ACJC
TAN JIA XIN, NJC
NEO MINGHAO,
RVHS



It pays to do well in our quarterly tests!

The results of our 1st quarterly test has been finalised!

The TOP prize of an iPad mini (choice of Apple Watch as alternative) goes to Qian Zi Han of RVHS, with a test score of 33/55.

The 2nd prize* of \$100 Starbucks card goes to the following students:

Tai Jia Hui, ACJC

Tan Jia Xin, NJC

Neo Ming Hao, RVHS

Prizes will be given out in class during our June holiday lessons.

*3rd prize was cancelled as there were 3 students who tied for 2nd prize.

Won't these perks end up costing a lot though?

"The perks [do] cost us, but I think that it helps to provide an encouraging environment for students to learn," shares Eugene.

Finding The Right Balance In Business And Life

Of course, even with all the perks in the world, Eugene admits that he still finds it difficult to get students to practice consistently.

"If you give them homework, most of them won't do it, because they may already have a lot of commitments on their plate. If you get them to do time-trial in class, they'd think it's a waste of time."

At the start, even deciding on the fees proved to be a conundrum:

If you set your fees too high, you end up pricing out the lower-income group from tuition. If you set your fees too low, parents will ask if your tuition is of good quality – some see that pricing is a signal for quality when it comes to goods like education and healthcare.

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With such a hectic schedule, Eugene is also currently facing the challenge of achieving work-like balance.

"I have a super active son who is almost 2, and I also have a beautiful wife. I would like to spend more time with them and also take a bigger interest in my own son's education and development."

The Future Of ETG

When asked about his plans for ETG, Eugene admits that at this juncture, while he can't picture the exact direction they'll be heading, he's "always open to opportunities and collaboration".

I hope to find ways to scale and grow the business [that will also allow] me to take a backseat instead of the crazy number of teaching hours I am doing now.

As for his advice to fellow entrepreneurs, he shares (in true tutor-style) that hard work is the key to success, regardless of the task or industry.

"If you just work hard, do your best and be the best that you can be – you can eventually become more competent in that field."