

## From worst in class to principal of design school

### MARK PHOOI

**O-Level results in 1978:** One B, one C, three Ds, one E and one credit. He sat the paper a total of four times, doing badly every time.  
**Now:** Principal of design school

The last time he stood on his secondary school stage as a student, he was being punished for cheating in an exam, never mind that he still ended up at the bottom of his cohort.

A few years ago, Mr Mark Phooi, who went on to become a millionaire, was invited to speak on the stage of his alma mater – formerly Tanglin Technical Secondary School and now known as Tanglin Secondary School – on how failure at a young age does not mean the end of the world.

Mr Phooi, 56, took his O levels four times – three as a private candidate. But he failed to get into a polytechnic like his peers.

“The first time I failed my O levels, I got two credits in Chinese and history,” said the self-confessed late bloomer, who started design agency Lancer Design at age 27 and made his first million five years later.

“There was a lot of disappointment because I had nowhere to go. I had to go out to work at the age of 16.

“Education was the only way to do well at the time. It was the pathway to a better future.”

He took on factory jobs and worked as a swimming coach, but the ambition to get into a polytechnic prompted him to re-take the national exam as a private candidate three more times.

The affable Mr Phooi, the fourth of five children, whose parents worked as labourers, eventually graduated with a diploma in applied arts from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in his late 20s, and later earned a master's degree in design from the University of New South Wales in Australia.

This “worst student” later went on to be the founder – and principal – of private design school First Media Design School.

“My experiences have helped me understand those who are late bloomers. I can feel for this group of people who are lost,” he said.

Instead of placing minimum academic requirements, his school only requires prospective students to have 10 years of basic education and a good command of English. Shortlisted candidates undergo an interview and sit a test to assess if they have a creative spark.

“This school gives a second chance to those who do not do well but have a passion for art,” he said.

Mr Phooi believes the O levels should not matter much in university applications.

“If we can pay more attention to matching talent with the course, it would save students a lot of headache,” he said.

### Calvin Yang

### HEARTACHE

**The first time I failed my O levels, I got two credits in Chinese and history... There was a lot of disappointment because I had nowhere to go. I had to go out to work at the age of 16.**



**MR MARK PHOOI**, recalling his first O-level failure.



Mr Mark Phooi, 56, holding up his 1978 GCE O-level certificate. He later earned a master's degree in design. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID



Mr Tan Kah Chye with his GCE O-level results. The “late developer” eventually became one of the top bankers in the world. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

# THE CASE FOR LATE BLOOMERS

Last month, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung proposed a review of the use of O-level results in university admission of poly graduates as it could exclude late bloomers from entry. **Calvin Yang** speaks to four who did poorly at the O levels but excelled later in life. Success after failure, they say, is entirely possible.

He managed only a D7 grade for O-level English and failed to make the cut for junior college, yet MP Liang Eng Hwa – who eventually took the polytechnic route – worked his way up to become a senior bank executive.

The MP for Holland-Bukit Timah GRC admits spending more time as a teenager catching spiders and fish from the stream near his family's rented Woodlands house than reading English books.

That likely explains his low grade for the subject, but his drive saw him graduate with a civil engineering diploma from Singapore Polytechnic and later a commerce degree from the University of Melbourne.

No wonder then that the 54-year-old was introduced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as a “poly comeback kid” ahead of the 2006 General Election.

“I was sort of a late bloomer academically, far from the straight As type... although I did well in mathematics and science subjects. I did much better in polytechnic as the more applied curriculum in polytechnic suited me well,” Mr Liang told The Sunday Times, as he supported a suggestion by Education Minister Ong Ye Kung to review the scores some universities use to decide admission of polytechnic graduates. “Often, I do find some students who may not have done well in their O levels but excel in the polytechnics.”

Mr Liang, who did not apply to local universities then as he knew he could not get in, backed having a less rigid admission criteria so that polytechnic graduates – even if they do not do well in past national examinations – can have the opportunity to study at university. During his time, the criteria for polytechnic graduates were more stringent, with fewer places set aside in universities here.

Last month, Mr Ong pointed out the role O-level results play in the admission process for such graduates.

Take, for example, a polytechnic graduate applying to enter the National University of Singapore

(NUS) or Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The applicant would have a composite university admission score used to evaluate him or her, of which 20 per cent is made up of the applicant's O-level results and 80 per cent comes from the grade point average, or GPA, achieved at the polytechnic.

Observers have called for a review of this, arguing that the weightage of the O levels should be reduced further or done away with entirely.

Mr Ong said: “A practice like this will raise the stakes of O-level exams. This sends the signal that the results of this exam have long-lasting impact on your life. Perhaps, it is time to review it.”

In comparison, students seeking university admission through the junior college route are evaluated on their A-level results.

### ONE-THIRD ARE POLY GRADS

About a third of local university students admitted last year were polytechnic graduates, the Education Ministry told The Sunday Times. This is up from about a quarter in 2012.

In separate replies, NUS and NTU said their admission criteria may be reviewed.

But not all local universities have the 20 per cent O-level criterion. For instance, Singapore Management University provost Lily Kong said the institution has a “holistic admissions framework” that looks at an applicant's polytechnic GPA and not O-level results.

Past O-level scores should have no bearing on future performance, say observers.

Ms Linda Teo, country manager at ManpowerGroup Singapore, said: “One's O-level results are an indicator of the individual's academic ability at that point in time, and not necessarily a true reflection of the individual's aptitude and potential.” In a rapidly changing economy, those “with the right mix of skills will be in demand, regardless of their academic results”.

Manpower experts said O-level results matter little in job inter-



MP Liang Eng Hwa, who had failed to make the cut for junior college, receiving his civil engineering diploma from Singapore Polytechnic. He would later become a senior bank executive. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LIANG ENG HWA

**In recent years, the education system, which has had a reputation for being overly focused on book smarts, has been changing at every level... But shifting mindsets away from the relentless pursuit of academic grades still remains a challenge.**

views, especially when an applicant has a higher qualification. In reality, few employers will ask to see O-level results.

Mr David Leong, managing director of PeopleWorldwide Consulting, said the formality is merely to check that applicants have gone through basic education.

Even then, employers are unlikely to scrutinise the scores, he added. “Even if it is one of the tick-box requirements, the O-level score will not move the nee-

dle at all in scoring a candidate.”

Rather, employers look for non-academic cues, such as a person's attitude and response to different scenarios during interviews, and “not the O-level As or Bs”, said Mr Leong.

### COMPETENCY IN OTHER AREAS

Jalan Besar GRC MP Denise Phua, who heads the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, said: “For too long, academic results alone have been the proxy to determine one's suitability for higher studies. But if you were opting for performing arts or design, then the weightage of skills and aptitude ought to be much higher than the theory.”

But some challenges may arise.

Universities will need to think about how to assess polytechnic applicants when the course they would like to pursue is different from what they read in polytechnic, said NUS lecturer Kelvin Seah. He cited a business information technology diploma holder who plans to study law in university.

“Currently, universities will be able to assess if this student would be a good fit for law, since they would be able to base their decisions on things such as his O-level English score,” Dr Seah noted.

“And we know that performing well in business IT is no guarantee for performing well in law since the skill sets are quite different.”

In recent years, the education system, which has had a reputation for being overly focused on book smarts, has been changing at every level – from primary schools to the tertiary level. For instance, tertiary institutions have expanded their aptitude-based admissions.

But shifting mindsets away from the relentless pursuit of academic grades still remains a challenge.

Mr Paul Heng, managing director of NeXT Career Consulting Group, noted: “Much as we would like to do away with an emphasis on academic results, it will take a while for this to actually happen.”

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## Top banker didn't make cut for JC or poly

### TAN KAH CHYE

**O-level results in 1980:** Three Bs, two Cs, one D and one credit.  
**Now:** Entrepreneur and top banker

Entrepreneur Tan Kah Chye failed his O-level English examination and did not make it to junior college or polytechnic.

But the “late developer” eventually became one of the top bankers in the world and has gone on to start global fintech firm CCRManager.

“Naturally, I was devastated... I was rather lost as to what I should do next,” said 54-year-old Mr Tan, who later put himself through school in Canada by selling vacuum cleaners and encyclopaedias.

A student's score at one point in time does not necessarily guarantee success in future, he added, noting that the path a person has taken is more important.

Mr Tan, who also served as chairman of the International Chamber of Commerce Banking Commission, added that Singapore needs to develop more well-rounded people – particularly in areas such as critical thinking and communication – to be competitive in the job market.

“As a country, we are already doing very well in the hard subjects. Now, we need to place greater focus on the soft skills,” he said.

### Calvin Yang



Mr Joshua Soh now proudly wears his “repeat student” tag as a badge of honour. TNP FILE PHOTO

## COO's valuable lesson from resitting exam

### JOSHUA SOH

**O-level results:** 21 points on first try, and 12 on second attempt  
**Now:** Chief operating officer at venture studio Nogle Limited

Having to resit his O levels was a humbling experience for technology high-flier Joshua Soh, who went on to become tech giant Cisco Systems' managing director for Singapore and Brunei.

Mr Soh, now chief operating officer at venture studio Nogle Limited, struggled at St Joseph's Institution, particularly with Chinese and maths. He scored 21 points on his first O-level attempt, so he decided to resit the national exam.

“I had to eat a huge humble pie when I returned as a repeat student. However, that year was such an incredible journey of self-discovery. I realised I could achieve anything, if I set my mind to it,” the 49-year-old said.

It took him six years to get through secondary school – five years in the Normal (Academic) stream and one extra year as a repeat student. He scored 12 points on his second try and was posted to Catholic Junior College. He went on to study English language and literature at the National University of Singapore, but left before graduating to work at a tech start-up.

He now proudly wears his “repeat student” tag as a badge of honour whenever he shares his education story: “That lesson from repeating my O levels has helped me many times... I learnt that with resilience, determination and focus, failure is only temporary.”

When interviewing job applicants now, he does not look at O-level results. “I think it's odd for a job applicant to state his O-level results because no matter how stellar... they do not reflect if this applicant is able to contribute to the success of the organisation.”

### Calvin Yang