Former ITE boy pursues dream at NUS with scholarship

The infocomm technology student is set on continuing work on his sign-language device

Raynold Toh

Mr Quek Kai Yu is on a personal mission – one that has helped take him from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) to Temasek Polytechnic to the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The 25-year-old wants to create a device that can interpret sign language by detecting hand movements using a video camera and translating them into English text.

He made a prototype in 2013 for the Microsoft Imagine Cup, a competition where participants attempt to use technology in innovative ways.

His project, submitted as part of Temasek Polytechnic's team, was ranked second in the contest.

Mr Quek hopes his device will help make communicating with deaf-mute people easier.

His parents, Mr Quek Seng Pwat, a stock taker, and Madam Ng Eng Hwee, are both partially deaf-mute.

In 2009, he went to ITE, where he studied infocomm technology. He credits his lecturer, Mr Loo Hanley, with igniting his passion for infocomm technology.

Graduating from ITE with a perfect grade point average (GPA) of 4.0 in 2010, he secured a place in the Infocomm and Network Engineering course in Temasek Polytechnic (TP) in 2011 and set his mind on reaching university eventually. To that end, Mr Quek's determination has been unflinching.

He studied till late at night frequently and also took part in external competitions such as the Microsoft Imagine Cup to upgrade his portfolio to compete with students from other schools.

During his final year in TP, his hard work paid off and he achieved a GPA of 3.97, sufficient to earn him an interview with the School of Computing at NUS.

Adding to his academic achievements, he was last year awarded the National Infocomm Scholarship, presented by the Infocomm Media Development Authority to promising undergraduates pursuing an infocomm-related course.

Now, he is part of the NUS' University Scholars Programme, an undergraduate academic programme that focuses on strengthening core academic and professional skills.

He is also his family's pride.

"My mum was so thrilled that she told all my relatives I got into university on a scholarship," he added with a sheepish smile.

He admits he has come a long way from the days in primary school when he would feel embarrassed of publicly conversing with his parents in sign language.

"It was quite hard to pick up sign language when growing up," said Mr Quek, who was taught by his cousins and sister. Even now, he sometimes has problems interacting with his parents.

Translating is even harder as the sign language used by his mother is slightly different from the American version used by his father.

When The Straits Times interviewed the Quek family last Friday, Mr Quek was unable to translate some questions posed to his parents into sign language and had to write them down on paper.

"But they showered me with a lot of love and tried their best to give me all that I asked for," said Mr Quek, who aspires to become a computer science professional.

Communicating with reporters in sign language, Madam Ng, a wire wrapper, said she was very proud of her son's accomplishments, despite being unable to supervise his studies because of her work.

She added that most of her son's achievements were due to his own perseverance and initiative.

As a sign of how hard his parents worked to support the family, Mr Quek told reporters that they had to miss his scholarship presentation ceremony due to their job schedules.

Though his focus is currently on his university's mid-term examinations, he hopes to resume work on his sign-language device soon. He has even started looking for partners for his project.

raynoldt@sph.com.sg

Mr Quek conversing in sign language with his parents, who missed his scholarship presentation ceremony because of their job schedules. He wants to create a device that can interpret sign language by detecting hand movements using a video camera and translating them into English text. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

National Infocomm Scholarship: How to apply

The National Infocomm Scholarship, offered by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), is open to all Singaporean undergraduates pursuing an infocomm-related course.

Expenses covered by the scholarship include tuition fees, hostel fees, an annual allowance and a one-time computer allowance.

For scholarship holders pursuing their studies overseas, hostel fees and airfare are also included.

Scholarship holders are typically bonded for three years (local scholarship) or five years (overseas scholarship), and can choose the organisation they want to serve their bond in, subject to IMDA's approval.

Those who perform well are also eligible for further sponsorship for their master's studies.

Applications are open for this year and will close on March 24. Interested applicants can apply through the BrightSparks education portal online.

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