

From playing truant to creating 3D animation for TV

Pearl Lee

He had always enjoyed doodling in his younger days, but Mr Chen Zhangkai, 27, never thought of it as a viable career option.

“Drawing was one of those things that would make people say, ‘Oh, you can’t earn money from that,’” he said.

It did not help that his studies did not excite him.

Then a Normal (Technical) student in Loyang Secondary School, Mr Chen frequently got into trouble for fighting and playing truant.

He eventually entered the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), where he enrolled in a digital animation course, a move that turned his life around for the better.

“I remember reading about the course in a brochure and thinking to myself that it sounded interesting,” said Mr Chen.

“It was in ITE that I realised there’s so much more to drawing and so many options I could explore. That was the first time I felt I was doing something I enjoyed and I was able to do it well.”

He obtained good grades and was accepted into Nanyang Polytechnic. Later, he went on to the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), the country’s first university for polytechnic graduates.

Mr Chen graduated last year with a digital art and animation degree

from the DigiPen Institute of Technology, which collaborates with SIT.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong shared Mr Chen’s story in his National Day Rally speech to illustrate how the Government is creating more opportunities and pathways for different groups of students to excel.

“(The SkillsFuture initiative) will produce more success stories like Zhangkai’s. There are always opportunities, no matter where you are, to upgrade and do better,” he said.

He also announced SIT’s plan to expand its annual student intake to 3,500 in 2020, up from the current 2,000.

The university has a strong focus on applied learning, which works well for students who prefer hands-on learning, and work attachment programmes to help them gain skills relevant to the workplace.

Mr Chen got an internship when his final-year project impressed the director of an animation studio.

He continued working in the firm for about eight months after graduating from SIT, before moving to another animation production firm.

He now creates 3D animation for a TV series for children.

The oldest of three sons of supermarket workers said: “This is my dream job. I really don’t know where I’d be if I weren’t given all these opportunities.”

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Mr Chen Zhangkai’s life changed after he enrolled in an Institute of Technical Education digital animation course, where he realised there was much more to drawing and several options he could explore. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

GRATEFUL

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MR CHEN ZHANGKAI, a polytechnic graduate who went on to the Singapore Institute of Technology. He graduated last year with a digital art and animation degree