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Kicked out of polytechnic twice, 'problem' student makes the Dean's list in university

Mr Samuel Fong will graduate from Nanyang Technological University this year. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

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SINGAPORE - Data analyst Samuel Fong was kicked out of polytechnic twice for long bouts of absenteeism and failing his exams.

But the third time's the charm. He enrolled yet again in 2016 at the age of 25, and this time did well enough to get into Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

In university, he made the Dean's list in his final two years and also earned a scholarship from insurance firm Aviva in his second year.

Come Tuesday (Sept 21), the 30-year-old will graduate with honours with highest distinction.

He is one of 9,200 NTU students who will receive their degrees at the university's convocation ceremonies held from last Friday to Oct 2.

Mr Fong's earlier troubles in school were due in part to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which he was diagnosed with when he was eight, he said.

He told The Straits Times: "I have always been a problem in classes, even in primary school. I was always being sent out of class and getting into fights. I was hard for my teachers to handle and life in school felt meaningless."

He first enrolled in Singapore Polytechnic's (SP) aeronautical engineering programme in 2008, but was expelled after his first semester for failing his examinations. He then finished his national service and reapplied to SP in 2011, where he struggled for two years in the same course before being expelled again.

Bad experiences with schoolmates in secondary school and a sense that his peers in polytechnic did not accept him led him to skip classes and examinations, he said.

"Once things started to snowball, I just couldn't get myself to do any work. I felt like I wasn't capable of anything."

Getting kicked out a second time affected not just him but his parents as well, he said.

"When I was younger, they were quite strict with me but, when I got kicked out a second time, they didn't really say much.

"I could tell they were just really disappointed and I was starting to think maybe they felt like nothing would work on me anymore."

Mr Samuel Fong's earlier troubles in school were due in part to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

He worked part time for a little over a year before deciding to try again in 2016. This time, he applied to study mechanical engineering.

On entering SP for the third time - rejoining as a second-year student - he set himself the simple goal of attending classes every day - and things started to come together for him, he said.

"It wasn't an overnight change. I didn't wake up one day and find that everything was different. To me, starting to do well was not about leaping to the moon - it was about consistency."

Over all four semesters before he got his diploma, Mr Fong held a grade point average of 4.0 out of 4.0.

Mr Fong applied to NTU through its aptitude-based admissions system, and was accepted to the mechanical engineering course in 2018.

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This was based on his exceptional grades in his second and final years in polytechnic, and his performance at an interview with the university, said NTU.

Since 2017, he has been devoting his free time to helping children who are in a similar situation to his.

He has been volunteering with Happy Children Happy Future and Shine Children and Youth Services, social services for underprivileged and children and those with special needs.

He said: "I know what it's like to feel down and out in the education system - once you are stereotyped as someone who is not academically talented, it becomes very difficult to fight that mindset.

"But the situation is so much more complex - I am considering becoming a teacher one day to help kids who are in the position that I was in."