

Very few make the grade at DigiPen

Only 12 students from first batch of 33 graduated from tough programme

Ian Poh

Shaun Lim had dreams of becoming a computer games creator when he enrolled at DigiPen Institute of Technology, the top American design and animation school that opened a Singapore campus in 2008.

Those dreams have since faded. The 23-year-old dropped out in February, after struggling with the workload over two semesters.

"There was very little breathing space between keeping up with projects and lessons. At the end of every semester, it felt like everyone wanted to quit. Those who chose to hang on just continued to struggle," said Mr Lim, who now hopes to start another degree programme elsewhere.

DigiPen, regarded as "the Harvard of game design", said before its arrival here that it ran a demanding programme. Its early batches of students have discovered just how tough it can get.

Of the first 33 students who enrolled in the fine arts in digital art and animation programme, only 12 survived to graduate in June; the rest dropped out.

The school now runs four degree programmes here and takes in between 150 and 160 students each year at its Buona Vista campus.

The Sunday Times understands that on average, about 25 per cent of every cohort has dropped out, an attrition rate that has raised eyebrows. They are a mix of those who give up, usually within the first semester, and those told to go.

A student is put on probation for the next semester if he falls below a grade-point average of 2, out of 4, and faces expulsion if his grades do not improve. He can apply for readmission after a year.

"We do not want to mislead anyone into believing that it is an easy feat to graduate from DigiPen," said its international chief operating officer, Mr Jason Chu.

DigiPen said this is made clear at its admission interview and orientation. Applicants can shadow students to get an idea of student life, and those who drop out may get credit transfers to degree programmes elsewhere.

Mr Chu said: "DigiPen will not



ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Ms Elizabeth Huang, a DigiPen Singapore graduate, is now a game artist with the Singapore branch of Japanese firm Tecmo Koei. DigiPen students are required to study in-depth modules within and outside their area of specialisation.

lower its standards to make sure all students pass and graduate, but it will provide as much support and assistance as possible to students who ask for it."

There is a lot to cope with because students have to study in-depth modules within and outside their area of specialisation.

For example, those doing game development must clear eight courses in mathematics, 20 levels of computer science, two courses in physics, plus eight semesters of projects designing games and three to four general electives.

Students said the emphasis on technical skills can sap all their passion, and constantly struggling to keep up is painful.

Mr Woo Kang Ning, 23, who dropped out from the game design programme in his second semester, said he was aware of the challenges but learnt too late what they were exactly.

"There was a lot of focus on mechanical aspects which I realised I didn't have much interest in. By the end, I lost my interest in game design," he said.

Students said that the way the degree programmes are structured made it difficult too.

DigiPen started as an independent school here with a four-year programme until 2010 when it became a partner of the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), which mostly runs two-year degree programmes for polytechnic upgraders.

To qualify for government subsidies which cut their average tuition fee from about \$15,500 to \$5,000 a semester, DigiPen's Singaporean students have since been expected to complete three semesters a year.

Most degree programmes run with two semesters and a long break of about three months a year. The more packed DigiPen pro-

gramme sees its students working through a "summer session" and taking shorter breaks between semesters.

Piled on top of the demanding course work, this has added even more pressure, the students said. Failing a module which is a prerequisite for other modules can mean a student ends up being unable to offer subjects he needs to complete his degree.

And if that means extending his time at DigiPen beyond the stipulated time frame, he will end up paying the higher, non-subsidised fees.

DigiPen chief technology officer Samir Abou Samra said the attrition rate in Singapore was generally "no different" from that of DigiPen's campus in the United States.

"We must ensure that our graduates are industry-ready when they graduate," he said.

But The Sunday Times understands that DigiPen is in discus-

COMPLETION RATES TRACKED: MOE

The Education Ministry (MOE) said yesterday that the Singapore Institute of Technology's (SIT) partnership with DigiPen allows students passionate about interactive digital media to pursue a publicly funded degree locally.

Noting the programmes offered by DigiPen here and in the United States are identical in content and academic rigour, it said: "MOE tracks completion rates of all publicly funded tertiary education programmes on an ongoing basis, and works with the tertiary education institutions, including SIT, to provide support to our students in Singapore, and to carry out reviews of the institutions' programmes from time to time." It added it would work with the SIT and DigiPen to help students meet the high standards.

sions with the SIT to review the programme structures and students' feedback on how having to squeeze the programmes into a shorter time frame is affecting them.

The school declined to provide details on what its first 12 Singapore graduates have gone on to do.

One in that select group is Ms Elizabeth Huang, a game artist with the Singapore branch of Japanese firm Tecmo Koei.

The 24-year-old, who did not come under the SIT scheme, said that her experience at DigiPen was fulfilling despite the steep learning curve.

"It would be good to have more rest time between semesters to review what you have learnt," she said.

"But completing your degree within a shorter time frame is just as good because it helps you prepare better for working life."

pohian@sph.com.sg