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Distinctive and Desirable: Junior Wonders Tuition Centre

Junior Wonders Tuition Centre was founded in April 2012 by Tan Weiqiang, a former Ministry of Education (MOE) teacher. Located in the heartlands, in a bomb shelter of an HDB block in Hougang, the centre offers tuition in primary and secondary school-level English, Math and Science. Since its founding, it has helped many

students become better learners – they achieve higher grades, have a more positive attitude towards schoolwork and show more discipline in learning.

Even though the enrolment numbers are healthy, the centre cannot cater to the increasing demand due to space and manpower constraints. More significantly, it does not want to lose its unique selling proposition of small class sizes where students are assured of more personalised attention from the teachers.

Balancing a high teacher-student ratio with long-term commercial sustainability requires a review in business strategy, and Mr Tan is working towards distinguishing the centre from other mass-market tuition centres. The niche offerings and higher value-add provided by the centre will potentially translate into longer-term benefits like enhanced reputation, steady enrolment numbers and business viability.

“One mark makes very little difference in life”

In a society underlined by meritocracy, education is a great leveller which enables people to move up the socio-economic stratum and achieve success in life. It is no wonder that parents – and often their children too – believe that doing well academically is a top priority. The competition for places in top-performing schools has become so intense that it is common to have parents moving to residences within one kilometre of their preferred schools so that their child stands a higher chance of getting a place in Primary One. Other parents have volunteered their services for two years prior to their child’s enrolment to chalk up the “requisite” volunteer hours, while others have generously supported, in cash and in kind, various school projects.

In recent years, MOE has taken steps to shift the focus from academic results to the holistic development of a child. Every school is a good school, and parents are urged to consider a school not only for its reputation but for how well it suits their child’s attributes and interests. Taking it one step further, MOE no longer publishes the details of top scorers in national examinations, including the PSLE. As Education Minister Heng Swee Keat reinforced at *The Straits Times* inaugural Education Forum on 4 May 2014, focusing on top scorers reinforces the mistaken notion that “education equals grades”. He added that in his experience in public service before he entered politics, he had met many top performers who did not have sterling grades. Rather, these “very smart people” have a “whole range of qualities in them that makes them such effective leaders”. He listed as examples the willingness to take risks and to learn new skills.

“Excellence, hard work – these remain very important qualities,” said Minister Heng at the same event, adding that “intangibles” like character, values and socio-emotional development also rank high in a child’s development. Getting the academic foundation right is essential, but this must go beyond grades

UOB-SMU

Asian Enterprise Institute

and examinations. Stressing that other things matter too, he added that the “difference between that one mark makes very little difference in life”.

But are the parents convinced? The jury is still out on this.

“Growing my asset”

Education is big business in Singapore. Some six years ago, an online poll by *The Sunday Times* had reported that 97% of all students here receive some form of tuition. Of these, over 50% received home tuition while others are enrolled in tuition centres or receive both forms of tuition. The Department of Statistics had pegged the tuition industry’s worth at S\$820 million in 2008, up some 74.5% from the S\$470 million in 1998.

Despite MOE’s assurances that grades should not be the be-all and end-all, brand-name tuition centres with long waiting lists and entrance tests continue to attract queues of anxious parents who believe the centres can give their children an extra edge in school. At the other end of the spectrum are parents who are ill-equipped to help their children in their schoolwork, and turn to tuition centres to do the job. They include parents who do not have the time, or the ability, to do so.

With demand comes supply. An online search using the key word “tuition” calls up the whole value chain of tuition-related businesses ranging from private tutors and tuition centres to “middle-men” matching agencies and even how to start a franchise tuition business. The numbers tell the same story – from about 100 registered tuition centres in 1998, there are now more than 500 registered tuition centres, and this does not include the unregistered ones or the over 30,000 full-time private, and countless part-time, tutors. Enrichment centres with niche branding, such as mind development institutes, can charge S\$2,000 a month and parents have no issues parting with S\$24,000 upfront in a two-year commitment for their child. As one parent shared, “I am growing my asset” while another said, “I am investing in my future”.

As society becomes more sophisticated, tuition centres have upped their game to reach out to their target audience. While flyers and marketing collaterals are still used for mass marketing, increasingly, centres are distinguishing themselves through branding efforts. Online platforms like websites, for example, are no longer used just for static information such as the listing of tuition services and fees. Instead, centres are positioning themselves as experts in the field by posting regular thought leadership and informative articles, or interacting with parents via Facebook. While word-of-mouth recommendations continue to provide an added level of confidence, by tapping on online and digital media platforms, the service providers have created new pathways to reach out to parents. Anecdotal feedback from parents suggests that they are happy to have access to the information they want at their own time and convenience.

“Slowly beginning to work”

There is power in perceived value, and this was one of the things that Junior Wonders’ founder Mr Tan wanted to know more about. In particular, he wanted to get “better insights” into how parents feel about tuition, and also how his centre can distinguish itself from the competition. “The data the student-consultants have collected was useful for us,” he said. He now has a better idea on how to advance his business strategy; he has also implemented some of the recommendations provided by the consulting team. “So far, it is slowly beginning to work,” he shared.

For the three student-consultants, participating in the UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute (AEI)’s flagship Consulting Programme opened their eyes to the real-life challenges faced by SMEs. While textbook concepts are useful, they are based on assumptions and hypothetical situations, said a student-consultant. “In an actual situation where money is on the line, assumptions are less significant. What is more important is that the business owner is convinced of the viability of the proposed solutions,” said another student-consultant. The team had tapped on their textbook knowledge, using scientific methods to perform data collection and analysis, before submitting the report with their recommendations.

UOB-SMU

Asian Enterprise Institute

Project Advisor Victor Kwan confessed to a little hesitation about his role at the start of the project. “Too involved and it will appear imposing; too distant and the students might not learn enough.” The hiccup quickly resolved itself as the project got underway. He found the students to be “logical in their thinking, determined in their search for information and have fresh ideas that can invigorate even jaded working professionals” like himself. He enjoyed the opportunity to guide the team, helping them with what works and what doesn’t, and guiding them towards the use of “interpersonal skills to reach an amicable solution for all parties”.

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