

# Free online lectures a hit with JC students

Peer website targets less well-off who cannot afford tuition

By SARAH GIAM

A COMMUNITY of about 60 junior college (JC) students past and present have banded together to offer free online lectures.

The website, openlectures.sg, carries video clips, each showing a member of the group giving a lecture on topics in JC economics and chemistry. Lectures in physics, biology, mathematics and geography will be added later.

The seven-month-old website was founded on the belief that quality education should be free. Promoting learning by peer-sharing, it aims to help students catch up on lessons they have missed or did not understand.

Students can control the pace of the lesson by pausing or rewinding to hear parts of a lecture again.

The site is the brainchild of Mr Qiu Linan, 22, and Mr Zhang Yitao, 21. Both are scholarship holders - Mr Qiu with the Economic Development Board (EDB) and Mr Zhang, the Singapore Police Force.

Mr Qiu is working full time on the website while waiting to start his studies at Columbia University in New York in August; Mr Zhang is a second-year economics major at Stanford University.

On the Open Lectures website, each lesson lasts between one and 15 minutes, with the lecturer standing before a whiteboard, giving out bite-sized pieces of information. About 100 lectures have been uploaded so far, with new ones added about twice a week.

Mr Qiu said of the recruiting of lecturers for the site: "Grades are considered when selecting them, but an ability to explain complex concepts in simple terms is far more important."

Other than the lecturers numbering about 60, another 10 individuals handle photography, media liaison and other logistics. All work pro bono.

The founders, Singapore citizens who were originally from Chi-

na, had at first thought pay would be an inevitable consideration, but to their surprise, those who came on board as lecturers were more concerned about the most appealing way to deliver the content and ensuring students understood it.

"Pay was a non-issue," said Mr Qiu.

It all started one night last June, when in response to Mr Qiu's quip that he could make money giving tuition in economics, Mr Zhang wondered how students who could not afford tuition could keep up with their wealthier peers.

The pair decided then and there to share their knowledge for free.

Mr Qiu set up the first version of openlectures.sg that night, with a plan to keep it a two-man outfit and to focus on free online economics lessons.

Soon, he and Mr Zhang realised more hands would be needed.

Ms Xu Yinghui, 22, a fourth-year student of international economics at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, gives lectures in economics and geography.

For her, it is about "giving back to society", having had top-notch teachers herself and an academically motivated circle of friends through her school years.

Referring to the pervasiveness of tuition here, she lamented that less well-off students could not afford this form of help.

"Open Lectures will give motivated students, regardless of income level, access to high-quality education," she said.

The EDB provides a filming venue to the team, which also uses a classroom in Pasir Ris Elias Community Club at times.

The videos on the website are winning students' approval, with the website and its Facebook and Twitter pages getting 500 to 1,000 hits daily.

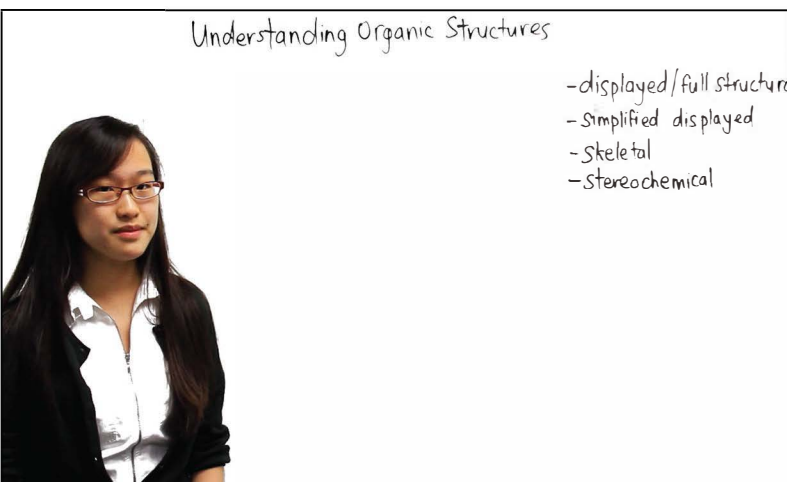
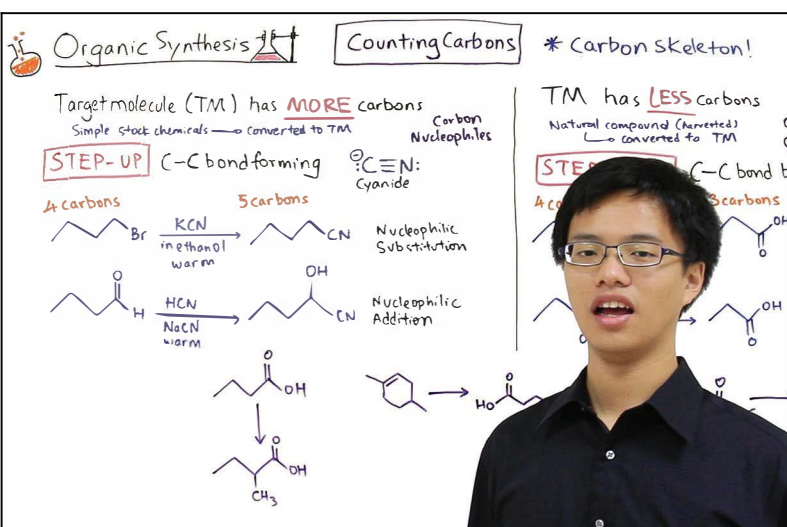
Ms Gloria Chua, 18, a final-year student at NUS High School who has been following the chemistry

clips, said the lecturers understood the common misconceptions among students.

Teachers also like what they see on the site. Mr George Tan, 41, a former JC teacher who now gives tuition to O-level students, praised the clips for organised and effective presentation; Mr Maverick Puah, 32, who teaches chemistry at a tuition centre, liked the clear audio and quality of teaching.

Mr Qiu, who has lived here since the age of seven, said it will be business as usual even after he leaves for the US "because all of us at Open Lectures are here for a common purpose - to provide free, quality education".

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Mr Davin Ryanputra (top) and Ms Samantha Seah (above), who finished their A-level studies last year, giving chemistry lessons on the Open Lectures website, which attracts 500 to 1,000 hits daily. PHOTO: OPEN LECTURES