

Never too late to restart learning journey in school after many years at work

“Life’s journey is an adventure. Personal achievement is about overcoming challenges and seizing opportunities. Your passion for learning, perseverance and purpose can turn failure into success.”

- Kunal Ghanisham

It was Kunal Ghanisham’s first day in school again in 2012, nine years after leaving the Institute of Technical Education (ITE). Although it was evening after a full day at work, he was very excited as he sat in class with other working adults like him. He had been looking forward to restarting his learning journey since leaving ITE with a Higher Nitec in Mechanical Engineering (Merit) in 2003. His night school was a local private education provider, where he was pursuing its Diploma in Business Administration part-time for a year. Full-time study was out of the question as he had to work full-time to help with his family’s household expenses.

This was Kunal’s first step in his continuing education and training (CET) at the age of 30, when he was serving the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN). He had already set his sight firmly on advancing his career with higher qualifications during and after his military service. But first he had to complete the first course of his CET journey in a subject that was totally new to him.

“Doing part-time studies was not easy,” he admitted. It was made even more challenging as he was the only one with an engineering background in his business class. All his classmates had business experience that he did not have. To make up for his lack of business exposure, he had to read up more diligently on business subjects. He had signed up for the course as he wanted to understand how a business operated and to learn the financial and other aspects of a business. As he would recall years later, his interest in financial planning and acquiring investment skills had kept him going despite the challenges. He also learnt about the importance of entrepreneurship in business start-up and development. Making presentations in class had also taught Kunal effective communication skills and techniques, beyond what he had learnt through trial and error in the navy. After completing the course, he was able to understand what a business would want from both engineering and business perspectives. What he had learnt would also prove useful in his next course of study.

More milestones on CET journey

Kunal’s successful completion of the Diploma in Business Administration course was to set the stage for his CET journey till today, when he is expecting to obtain his master degree from Coventry University of UK in mid-2020. This after he had earned two more diplomas from two local polytechnics and a bachelor degree in engineering from the same overseas university through a local private education institution.

Quite an achievement you might say for someone who grew up in a broken home. Kunal’s parents separated when he was a little boy and was cared for by his mother as her only child.

Growing up without a father to speak to and guide him as a kid and teenager was tough. “I had to learn about things by observing others, and through trial and error and experiencing bad moments,” he recalled. He had to stop his formal education after distinguishing himself during a full-time mechanical engineering course at ITE in 2003. This was made possible by the sponsorship of his employer RSN, which he joined straight after completing the course. “I believe the military experience straightened me and my life has turned out well since,” he shared.

Coping with secondary school education

Back in 1994, Kunal was attending St Patrick’s Secondary School, which prepared him for the GCE N Level examinations. As a teenager, he “could not figure out what (he) wanted to do with (his) life”. He recalled not having to “make any difficult decisions or choices” during those five years. “It was just a cycle,” he added, passing one year after another. For his final school project, he built his first guitar stand with just a simple sketch. It was a creation that he was “very proud” of. From the experience, he learnt that he could actually make something on his own. He felt a “great sense of achievement”. He also learnt the importance of having a strong desire to come up with something new of his own. Even at that tender age, he had already thought of helping to improve society by identifying issues and providing solutions for them.

Learning to excel in soccer during secondary school

Kunal remembered being “fat and slow” when he was in secondary school. That did not help him in his desire to play soccer. Nevertheless, his mother took him to the Geylang U-14 and U-16 trials to give him the opportunities to find out for himself. There he learnt to play the game properly from the coaches and by observing other kids who could play it very well. “How do I become like them?” was a constant question in his young mind then. At the trials, he was excited when he had the chance to meet with and learnt from well-known national footballers, including Fandi Ahmad, Sundram Moothy and Jang Jung.

Finding his right footing at ITE

Kunal’s GCE N Level results did not qualify him for courses at the local polytechnics. Perhaps he was not as academically inclined as he would have liked, he had consoled himself. However, he knew that he was good with his hands, like making the guitar stand. So, he applied for a “few courses” at ITE Balestier then without knowing what they actually were and was accepted as a full-time student. However, automotive and precision engineering caught his interest, as he was attracted by the word “engineering” and was curious about how “precise” engineering could be. “To be honest, I didn’t know what I was getting myself into,” he confessed years later. He did not quite understand what the course outline was about, until he went through it. In any case, he just enrolled as he had thought the course was “cool”.

During the first year of the two-year full-time course, Kunal found himself spending more time on sports and socialising with schoolmates than on his studies. It was therefore a challenge for him to focus on the academic aspects and the practical lessons. It came as a rude awakening when he received his first report card – he was the last in class! Fortunately for him, a classmate who’s a good friend spoke with him and told him to concentrate on his

studies and not just on sports. He realised that he had to do well and not end up last in class again.

Besides becoming more skilful with his hands, Kunal also learnt about how engineers would think and work. From the course, he also learnt about teamwork, caring for and helping one another, enjoying school life and making new friends. Precision engineering taught him the importance of being precise with very little or no margin for error and helped to hone his technical skills. It also prepared him well for his next course in mechanical engineering at ITE, as he found himself better than most of his classmates in explaining and demonstrating how to use certain machines and why things happened in the ways they did.

Continuing engineering education at ITE with sponsorship

With his Nitec certificate, Kunal still could not get into a polytechnic. Taking up ITE's Higher Nitec course was his only option for continuing his engineering education. However, there's another problem – his family could not afford to pay for his further education at ITE. There was also his national service obligation to fulfil. He preferred to serve in the navy instead of the army partly because of his affinity for water. "I feel calmer and more relaxed when I am out at sea," he explained. Serving in the navy could get him out of the house and be "far away" from home, a "quick escape" in his own words. Another reason was his admiration for the US Navy's professionalism and ethics since he was a boy. He added: "Part of joining the military was the excitement of being treated differently."

"Why not have the best of two possible worlds?" he thought. He could join RSN as a regular serviceman and ask it to sponsor his full-time ITE education. Kunal was successful in his application to RSN in 2001 and spent the next two years at ITE.

This time round, Kunal did not encounter any difficulties or barriers and was determined to do well at ITE. With his growing maturity, he became more focused on the end results. As he was sponsored by RSN, he was also motivated to pass all the subjects. While focusing on what he wanted and what he needed to do, he transformed himself as a person with a strong sense of purpose.

He excelled not only in his studies but also in sports such as running, rock climbing, soccer and table tennis, after learning to manage his time productively. In the process of helping his classmates with understanding theories and practical lessons and learning from one another, he made new friends.

During the Higher Nitec course, Kunal acquired mechanical skills to complement the precision skills gained from his earlier ITE course. For example, he was taught the correct way to hold a file and use it to smoothen the rough edges of an object. He also learnt about safety issues and how engineering had shaped and made the world a better place to live in.

Learning at work in navy

The navy gave Kunal the opportunity to explore the world beyond Singapore's shore. He had visited no less than 17 countries in Asia, Australia, Middle East and Africa and learnt about the different and contrasting ways of life there. For example, places like Djibouti in Somalia,

Africa did not have a developed public transport system and people there had to walk to their destinations, which could be many miles away. Somehow the hardship faced by some of the people he saw reminded him of his own hardship growing up and how the navy experience had gotten him 'ship-shaped' for the rest of his life.

During his time in RSN, he also explored within himself to understand what his life was all about. Being a navy career serviceman had helped Kunal to channel his energy to develop his own structured lifestyle. The military discipline, regimentation and focus on the target had also helped him on his learning journey. He learnt how to manage his time for work, school and leisure, which included an exercise regime. From RSN's various training sessions, he developed skills that he never knew existed, such as leadership, management and other soft skills. He learnt the difference between leading and managing people. The former was about setting a good example for others to follow, while the latter was about instructing others to perform and monitoring their progress, he shared. In addition to knowledge and skills gained at work in the navy, Kunal learnt how to be a leader by guiding younger sailors, and how to be patient and analytical. However, deep down he knew somehow that there was perhaps "more to be done out there". The answer became clear to him when he decided to leave the navy many years later.

Kunal also attended various development courses conducted by external and internal trainers that lasted from a day to a week while he was in RSN. They included those on resource management, WITS leadership, quality audit and stress management. Still, he felt something was missing on his learning journey – a university degree. There and then, he set his mind on pursuing higher education and decided to scale its pinnacle in due course.

However, all the training that he had received in the navy since 2003 did not prepare Kunal for what he was about to experience. The year was 2004, when the ship he was posted to was tasked to help with relief efforts in Aceh in Indonesia that was hit by a massive tsunami. When he arrived with other navy personnel, he saw the utter devastation there for the very first time. He was completely dumbfounded and felt very sad for the many people who had lost their lives during the disaster and for their families who had managed to survive. He wondered why this had happened and felt the need to help people around the world if he could. But how could he have helped beyond basic recovery work? This question was to repeat itself at the back of his mind in the years to come when he was pursuing his higher engineering education.

Kunal spent three weeks at Aceh on rotational shift duties rendering medical assistance and help with the construction of roads with fellow Singaporeans from the army and civil defence. The learning experience in Aceh would turn out to be priceless and life-changing for him. He recalled seeing badly mutilated bodies covering the roads, which needed to be cleared before reconstruction could begin. Never before had he come across such a tragic sight. The exposure was instructive. It reminded him that life is precious. Kunal recalled: "When I helped the needy, the injured and those crying, I felt a surge of power in me that I could not explain at that moment." It was his moment of epiphany, when he realised his purpose in life – doing good and helping others. This self-discovery was to influence his continuing education in

engineering later in his life. But first he has to complete the next milestone as another stepping stone on his learning journey.



Somewhere in the Gulf in 2010, during Kunal's (front row, first from right) last overseas trip before leaving the ship and taking up an office role at Republic of Singapore Navy. (Photo: Kunal Ghanisham)

Fulfilling desire for polytechnic education

After serving the RSN for more than 10 years, Kunal wanted to know more about the maritime industry, which he was considering for his next career. What better way than to do so while earning a qualification at the same time, he thought. So, he signed up for the part-time Diploma in Shipping Operations and Management course at the Singapore Polytechnic. He finally had the chance to study at a polytechnic, something he could not do after obtaining the GCE N Level certificate years ago. Needless to say, he was most eager to learn and complete the course.

This time round, his maturity and marine experience proved to be advantageous to his learning. He recalled that “everything went smoothly” and there were no barriers or issues to distract him when he’s focused on studying. He explained: “It’s all about time management.” In between work and study, he would take a break to chill out or hang out with friends. He made new friends in class and would chat with them about what’s going on in the maritime industry. During lessons, he learnt about its key regulations, how cargoes were being transported by sea, the do’s and don’ts when chartering a vessel, and the legal terms used in a chartering agreement, among others. This knowledge combined with his prior exposure to ship repair was to stand him in good stead when he started to work in a ship management company later.

One more diploma from another polytechnic

One good turn deserved another. After obtaining his first diploma from Singapore Polytechnic in April 2015, Kunal started on his next diploma course at another polytechnic the following month. That same month, he started at his first job in the commercial sector after leaving the navy as a marine engineer with the rank of staff sergeant. The Graduate Diploma in Marine Offshore Technology programme at Ngee Ann Polytechnic was also a part-time 12-month course. He wanted to learn how a naval architect designed a sea vessel and what the design issues in the offshore industry were, so that he could understand the “whole picture” from a design point of view. He explained: “The building of ships, offshore structures and floating vessels starts in the mind of the naval architect.”

To his disappointment, some of the course lecturers could not articulate and explain in a way that he and his classmates could understand. Their many questions were thus not answered satisfactorily. Fortunately, they could approach another lecturer who was able to explain what was taught better. Doing research for his assignments and examinations presented yet another challenge for Kunal. Besides coping with the deluge of information gathered, he was hard-pressed for time due to the demands of his new full-time job. Time management and staying focused became critical for him. “Even if I had minimal sleep, I had to finish what I planned to do,” he added. He wanted to continue learning in school and was determined to complete the course.

Kunal completed the course in 2016. Besides the qualification earned, he gained more confidence in his ability to learn new things. This in turn made him “hungry to learn more”. A key lesson Kunal had learnt from the course was the constant need to do his own due diligence in checking and rechecking his work without being over-confident. At work, he was able to calculate the velocity of fluid flow and to evaluate the risks of an offshore job, for example. He had also gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of the marine and offshore industry in general and the design issues faced by engineers in particular. What he had learnt about marine offshore technology would also prove useful in his next course of study.

First degree in higher education

Getting a bachelor degree in engineering would be the next logical step in Kunal’s quest for higher education through the part-time private pathway that he had decided on his return to school. His excellent performance in the Higher Nitec in Mechanical Engineering course at ITE had ignited his interest and encouraged him to want to learn more about engineering. This interest was reinforced by his engineering roles in the navy. Starting on a degree programme soon after his last diploma course would enable him to ride on the learning momentum that he had built up over the past four years. This had been his plan all along while he was still in the navy. It was an opportune time too as he had just settled into his new job at ST Marine. Using the knowledge that he would be gaining at university to contribute back to society was something that appealed a lot to him. “But which university and which local course provider?” he pondered.



For one of his bachelor programme modules in 2017, Kunal came up with the idea of designing and building a tripolar prototype as a team project. He proposed it during his group discussion on renewable energy for sustainable living. He had thought of it after learning of his cousins' experience in the US Virgin Islands. Whenever a storm or hurricane hit, power supply was lost and daily living was disrupted. The prototype successfully demonstrated that it was able to absorb energy from natural sources – the sun via solar panel, wind via turbine and droplets of water via piezo-electric sensor – to power the mobile phone and smaller electrical devices. Kunal and his team had applied engineering principles from the course to develop the prototype. (Photo: Kunal Ghanisham)

Kunal started to search for a suitable university that offered a bachelor programme in engineering he would qualify for and which he could afford to take up through a private education institution in Singapore. He finally decided on [Coventry University](#) that's highly ranked among private universities in UK and represented in Singapore by [PSB Academy](#). PSB Academy was the only local course provider for the university's bachelor programme in mechanical engineering. He had noted that it was well-recognised for its programmes and had received positive feedback and reviews from its students.

With advanced knowledge of mechanical engineering, Kunal would be able to, for example, explore, conceive, design and construct a sheltered walkway linking a footpath to a train station. In addition, he could work out a project management plan and maintenance programme with the required financials.

But first he had to overcome the challenges faced in juggling the much heavier workload in his full-time job and his part-time study after work. He found himself often arriving late for class in sweat and looking rather unkempt. Even his lecturers became concerned for his well-being. After class, he had to stay up very late at night to catch up on his school work. He recalled: "I had only several hours of sleep on those nights and started to lose my hair. I became even more stressed as a result."

Nevertheless, Kunal was determined to put in the time and effort to complete the course. “My desire to study kept me going,” he revealed. It was in turn motivated by his desire to apply what he learnt, contribute back to society and pursue higher education. “I learnt first-hand that everything is about hard work and perseverance,” he added. In class, he relearnt the importance of teamwork among classmates in studying together and supporting each other to complete the learning journey successfully.

While thinking of what to do for his final-year project work, Kunal remembered the thought that he had while he was helping with the tsunami relief work in Aceh in 2004. “How could I have helped beyond basic recovery work?” His vivid recollection of his experience there spurred him to single-handedly conceive and create a portable solar-powered filtration unit that could filter dirty water and produce clean water for drinking, after extensive research and development. How he wished he had this device with him when he was in Aceh, where drinkable water was hard to come by after the tsunami! Kunal’s lecturer and project supervisor Dr Goh Eng Yew recalled that the prototype he had built was compact yet very detailed and included all the necessary stages in the filtration process. Dr Goh had noted that Kunal was motivated by his desire to provide such a device for people working at sea and those trapped during a disaster.

Besides earning his bachelor degree from Coventry University, Kunal found his bearing in charting his engineering career path. What he learnt from the course was “very relevant” to his work. The knowledge he gained was applied at ST Marine in the supervision and maintenance of submarines that required proper documentation with thorough checking and rechecking. His engineering education was also brought to bear on the many projects that he managed at Harris Pye. It would also prepare him for his next course of study in engineering management that requires a higher level of research work on finding solutions to real-world problems.



Prototype of the portable solar-powered filtration unit that Kunal presented as his project for a bachelor programme’s module in 2019. (Photo: Kunal Ghanisham)

Continuing with postgraduate education soon after

After graduating from Coventry University with a [Bachelor of Engineering with Honours in Mechanical Engineering](#) degree, Kunal wanted to learn even more about engineering but with both business and management perspectives. Such a qualification, he believed, would give him the edge in his career development as an engineer in a management or leadership role. It would also prepare him for his doctoral journey requiring deeper strategic thinking and more rigorous research later.

He scoured the market for available options, bearing in mind how the workforce was expected to develop in future. As an alumnus of Coventry University, he naturally enquired about its master programmes and was impressed by the course outline and learning objectives of its [Master of Science in Engineering Business Management](#) programme. The course was also being offered by PSB Academy where he had already spent 2.5 years studying for his bachelor degree. It's something he could pay with his savings and a bank loan.

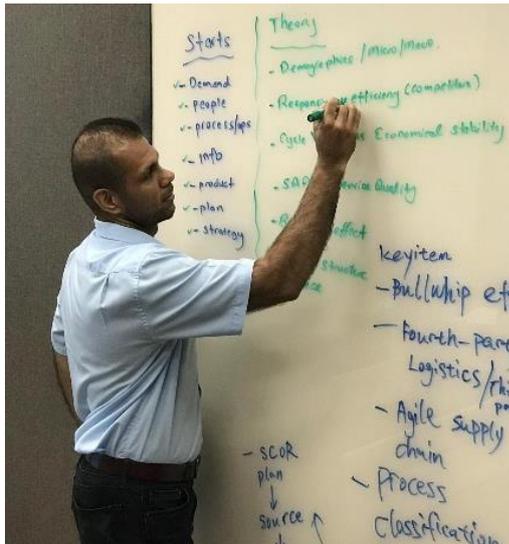
At PSB Academy, progression talks are held to encourage undergraduate students to pursue further studies, according to its Assistant Head (Academic), [School of Postgraduate Studies](#) Dr John Heng. For postgraduate students, it would arrange consultative informal discussions with them, he added.

Kunal started on the master programme at PSB Academy in April 2019 and is expecting to complete it in July 2020 with the submission of his dissertation. With his past experience in juggling work and school, time management this time round has been more manageable for him, despite the many overseas trips required in his present job. This outcome is the result of his careful planning. Even when he's overseas, he would find time to work on his research or assignments. Sometimes, he would find himself revising lessons and doing assignments during the flights. After a year into the course, he does not foresee any challenges coming his way before he completes it.

He is applying strategic thinking that he has learnt from the programme in his present job as a project manager. From his exposure to his classmates who work in other industries, he learnt how other companies plan strategically and market their products and services. He is also applying what he has learnt from the course to improve the quality of his company's solutions to customers through effective planning and efficient project management.

During this postgraduate learning journey, Kunal has gained further insights into how research for an academic study can be done more efficiently. The engineering and management journals that he has been reading were selected based on the assignment questions. Such publications have opened up his mind to other ideas in the two subject areas. For his last assignment, he relied on such information sources when he tackled the issue of customers opting for customised design solutions in the manufacturing industry.

As a Coventry University's alumnus, Kunal was proud to learn that its partnership in advanced manufacturing and engineering with Unipart Manufacturing Group (known as 'faculty on the factory floor') received the prestigious Queen's Anniversary Prize for "excellence and innovation" in UK higher education in early 2020.



During the last MSc class in early 2020, Kunal presented his ideas on Apple's supply chain that has enabled it to be first with new products on the market. (Photo: Kunal Ghanisham)

A defining learning outcome for Kunal in his higher education is the dissertation that he is required to submit at the end of the course. With his long navy career and sailing the seas to visit many countries, water issues became close to his heart. For one of his modules, he chose to tackle the issue of water scarcity in two countries with contrasting geography – Mexico, which has long coastlines on both sides, and Nepal, which is situated high up on the Himalayan mountains. His research was based on his visit to Mexico and reading of relevant journals and articles in the mass media. For Nepal, he relied on the Internet for his research. Naturally, he has chosen water scarcity and environmental issues around the world as the topic for his dissertation. No doubt, the programme's module on sustainability and the environment has sparked his interest in the topic.

Learning from working as volunteer

Kunal has always believed in giving back to society. Despite his hectic schedule of full-time work and part-time study, he has found time and energy to coach kids in youth soccer and helping them to develop into better players. From his experience, he has learnt how to make the children listen to his instructions and to perform accordingly. As a coach, he aims to teach them how to become better in what they do beyond soccer.

He also hopes to teach soccer to disadvantaged children in Malaysia and Indonesia in future. He even dreams of starting his own soccer school someday. "This will be my legacy," he enthused.

Learning at leisure and play since young

When he was a little boy, Kunal developed a fear of water after an incident at the Big Splash. Years later, he decided to face his fear and took up swimming lessons. From the training, he learnt to overcome his fear of water and resolved never to let any fear get in the way of

achieving his goals in life. “Having the right mindset and necessary skills can overcome anything,” he shared.

This sense of self-confidence grew in Kunal into adulthood. In 2008, while he was on duty on board a navy ship patrolling the Arabian Sea, he literally took the plunge in the middle of nowhere without a life jacket at the spur of the moment when “it just felt right”. It was a “great feeling” albeit for just a few moments when he swam the sea over a short distance. What did he learn from the unexpected experience? “That I could achieve anything I want in life,” he replied.

Being a down-to-earth person who has sailed the ‘seven seas’ did not stop Kunal from watching the moon and stars and wondering what and who may be out there in the immense universe. He realised how little is known beyond planet Earth. “One day, I will travel to outer space,” he had told himself. It’s something he plans to do in his lifetime, finance and technology permitting. He recalled having a keen interest in learning about astronomy in primary school, starry-eyed and all. Back then, his teachers were explaining with blackboard and basic books on the subject. His fascination with astronomy had grown since then.

Since young, Kunal had learnt that he could excel in sports, particularly long-distance running, soccer and table tennis. From them, he learnt about gaining strength from discipline, respect from not being over-confident and joy from victory. From long-distance running, he learnt the importance of endurance, strength and form and how they relate to life itself, as in overcoming obstacles and being mentally, physically and emotionally prepared to finish the race. From soccer, he learnt how to be creative and to think out of the box. As for table tennis, it was simply “fun” for him to relax with a good game.



Kunal as a youth coach (fourth from right, back row) at a grassroots coaching course conducted by the Football Association of Singapore in 2018. (Photo: Kunal Ghanisham)

In primary school, Kunal picked up the guitar and was strumming it till secondary school. He learnt how to play it from a classmate and practised by listening to songs and strumming along with them. He would often borrow music books to learn different songs to play. In secondary school, he formed his own band as he had thought that it would be “cool to be a young rock star”. “But that was just a passing phase,” he recounted years later. From that ‘start-up’ experience, he learnt the importance of teamwork and practising the craft.

While studying precision engineering at ITE Balestier, Kunal was “called up” to play for Balestier United U-16 and U-18 soccer teams. During the practice sessions, he learnt the importance of having the right attitude, focus, training and teamwork in preparing for matches. After leaving ITE Balestier, he continued to play soccer. After attending trials at four local leagues, he was selected by Gombak United to play in the Prime League, before he was called up for national service. During the short stint, he learnt to control his emotions whenever he made a mistake and to deal with pressure in a situation. “It was important not to be too hard on myself,” he shared. His Korean coach taught him how to “read the game better, anticipate play and understand the striker’s body language and next move”, as well as patience and timing. From his Nigerian friend, he learnt a few tricks with the ball. In addition, he spent hours watching videos of many games online to understand the game better.

At one point, Kunal thought that he was “onto something great” and was “finally focusing on something in my life”. He had dreamt of playing soccer for Manchester United of UK as a professional after his mother showed him a photo of one of the club’s star players. However, that has remained just a dream as he was thinking far ahead on “what exactly I want to do with my life”. For now, his priority is on doing his present job well while studying for his master degree. He plans to continue his learning journey and obtaining a doctorate, which will enable him to go into R & D and help change the world.

Benefiting from other learning opportunities

When his busy work and study schedules permitted, Kunal attended short courses on personal leadership and people management as part of his continuing professional and personal development. In addition, he had the opportunities to update himself by attending exhibitions for the marine, oil and gas industry in Singapore and overseas.

Kunal takes every opportunity to learn from his many overseas trips in the course of work. During his 22 years in the marine industry to date, he has travelled regularly to “half the world” by sea, air and land. What impressed him most about overseas travel was the understanding of life in other countries gained through his interaction with their people.

For example, he visited South Korea in 2019 to test the product that his company had just installed in a ship there. The sea trial went well. The field experience reinforced his understanding that things were never certain and that he needed to check and confirm that they were working well. He also had the chance to learn and appreciate Korean hospitality and culture while he was in Seoul, apart from the country’s marine industry and cold weather. He had noted that Korean women showed their respect for the men by seeing them to the doorstep when they leave and waiting for the men to start eating before they do. In Tongyeong where he stayed, he noticed that “life took a pause”. He noted the “retirement

lifestyle” for the people there, as they went about their daily living calmly and spent much time with their families, although they were mostly working adults.

More recently, Kunal was in Norway on another working trip during his school’s term break. This meant no assignment or lesson revision and more time for leisure! During his tour of the capital city Oslo, he visited some museums and found them to be “simple but rich in history”. One museum featured the Kon-Tiki expedition across the Pacific Ocean on a balsawood raft. He was “amazed” by how those explorers did it. Although he left Norway without seeing the well-known Northern Light due to his tight schedule, he intends to catch the beautiful aurora on his next visit.

What lifelong learning means to Kunal

Based on his experience in school and at work to date, lifelong learning for Kunal is a journey filled with patience, positive attitude and new knowledge that enable him to scale greater heights in life. When asked which of his learning milestones was most fulfilling, he shared that all of them were very fulfilling and enriching on his life journey.

His learning journey has not been smooth sailing though. “There were times when I felt like giving up,” he confessed. However, his “inner voice” kept reminding him of what he needed to do. Exercising whenever his schedule permits is a must-do routine for him. He would run and train with weights to destress and free his mind from negative thoughts. Sometimes he would swim or go for a long walk. “I knew I had to push myself no matter what the difficulties,” he added.

Did he find the latest knowledge and skills and technology-enabled learning disrupting his old learning and old ways of learning? “Not at all,” was his spontaneous reply. He adapted very quickly and kept himself up-to-date with advancing technology and applications by exchanging ideas with others, reading bulletins and subscribing to newsletters.

For Kunal, success in lifelong learning is about setting aside time and putting in effort to learn new things, having the right attitude towards learning, understanding and applying what’s learnt, and achieving the desired learning outcomes. It is also about learning important values like patience, discipline, responsibility, perseverance and consideration for others, among others.

A bend in the road is not the end of the road

During his long learning journey, there were times when Kunal lost his mental focus and could not concentrate on his studies due to external factors beyond his control. For example, his employers would expect him to spend his time and attention on his full-time job when he is at work.

To get back on track for his part-time study and to regain the learning momentum that he had lost momentarily, Kunal would remind himself of the goals he had set and the importance of achieving them on time. What matters most to him is to reach his lifelong learning goals every step of the way. Every setback that he overcame had made him even stronger mentally and physically to meet the challenges ahead.

How others have helped Kunal on his learning journey

Some of Kunal's friends have encouraged him to "go all the way" and this has helped him to keep his focus and stay the course. Throughout his learning journey, his classmates were always willing to help him. Whenever he was late for class or absent due to work or overseas travel, they would take notes for him or explain what was taught when he's back in class. Some of his teachers had noted his commitment to learning and encouraged him to do well in his studies.

Looking back, Kunal is grateful to RSN for sponsoring his Higher Nitec course, which had helped to kick-start his continuing education and training during his long service there.

What others say about Kunal's passion for learning

Tracie Wong taught Kunal effective communications and academic writing skills in the bachelor programme in engineering at PSB Academy. She found him to be highly motivated and focused on his goals as a late bloomer. She remembered him as a "very responsive" and "responsible" student who kept her updated on his progress. "He never gave excuses if he had missed a lecture," said Tracie. She was impressed by Kunal's conduct as a "professional" who kept an open mind and was "very respectful" of others, although he had "a wealth of experience" as a mature student. "More importantly, he listened well and savoured every moment as a learning moment, connecting the dots (along the way)," she added. She saw Kunal as someone who viewed education not as a means to an end but as something that would nourish his curiosity.

What struck Capt Osman Sahwan about Kunal were his positive mindset towards learning and willingness to spend time and effort in acquiring the necessary knowledge to enhance his employability. As Kunal's former lecturer in the Diploma in Shipping Operations and Management course at Singapore Polytechnic, he found him seeking clarification whenever he had any doubt in class and sharing what he knew from his experience. He thinks that Kunal's passion for learning is driven by his desire to upgrade himself and remain relevant in the maritime industry.

Another lecturer who taught Kunal at Singapore Polytechnic was Capt Frederick James Francis, who's Senior Lecturer and Assistant Centre Director. He noted that Kunal was always challenging himself to do more and continued to pursue knowledge with greater focus as he progressed despite facing obstacles along the way. "In class and in a group, he showed leadership in initiating discussions and deep thinking of principles and their application rather than just their replication," Capt Francis added. Kunal still keeps him updated on what he's doing and asks him for advice on how to improve academically and professionally.

Dr Goh Eng Yew was Kunal's lecturer for both his undergraduate and master programmes at PSB Academy. He described Kunal as someone who has realised what he wanted in life and what he needed to do to advance in his career through school learning and work experience.

Dr John Heng of PSB Academy's School of Postgraduate Programmes met Kunal when he was teaching Study Skills and Research Method in the MSc programme. He also met Kunal at his workshop on Plagiarism and Critical Writing, which was not part of the course. He was struck

by Kunal's motivation to learn more by asking questions. He observed that he's a "natural problem solver and mediator" in resolving group project issues and was "always willing to help others". During a group discussion, he would take the initiative to brainstorm different ideas among members to arrive at a conclusion, Dr Heng shared.

Kunal's friend and former shipmate at RSN Alvin Arozoo has been inspired by his passion for learning. Alvin attributed Kunal's achievements to his "amazing set of values – discipline, commitment and perseverance". He sees Kunal as a role model since their navy days together. He knows of only a handful of people who can "align their individual goals" with a hectic work schedule and limited time. They are in "constant contact to share experiences" and support each other. He sees learning as empowering Kunal to adapt to changes and his journey from ITE to university as evidence of his passion for lifelong learning.

Former colleague at ST Marine Joshua Dinesh was inspired by Kunal to enrol for a degree programme. He had learnt of Kunal's experience in "excelling" professionally and as a person, and in growing in self-confidence through lifelong learning. As a colleague, he was influenced by Kunal's example in juggling "work, studies and life". "I want to be like him when I grow up," Joshua added. He thinks that Kunal is so passionate about lifelong learning because of the need to stay relevant and employable with more knowledge. He cited how Kunal would enrol for a course on hydraulics at ITE although he had worked in shipyards and the marine industry for many years, as he wanted to understand more about the subject. Kunal would use his lunch break to study for his examinations and catch up on his assignments, Joshua added. "He is always curious and is very focused on completing his learning journey."

Paul Gorin, Technical Sales Manager at Green Technologies, is another former colleague of Kunal. Both had worked in similar roles and projects. He is inspired by Kunal's learning journey and achievements to want to follow his example, as they have made Kunal a happier and better colleague and a more valuable employee. He could sense Kunal's determination on the first day he met him. "He is someone who is constantly setting goals. Education is one of them," Paul commented. On their business trips together, he had seen how Kunal would be reading and studying in his hotel room while the rest of them were relaxing at the bar. He also shared that Kunal would always have time to talk about new technologies and theories that he had just learnt with passion and enthusiasm.

As Kunal's former boss at Duprex Offshore, J.K. Ng described him as an "excellent and self-driven employee who never stopped learning, always taking initiatives and exploring new diversifications". He also shared that Kunal was always "searching for new directions in broadening his engineering knowledge" and is "constantly upgrading himself academically and learning new skills through various channels."

Kunal's present boss at Clean Marine Eirik Dahlberg is impressed by his desire to learn and improve himself at work. He appreciates Kunal's passion for lifelong learning, as shown through his hours spent on studying how new technologies work. He added: "Clearly Kunal has passion and drive. He has the desire to excel in order to reach new heights."

Next – scaling the pinnacle of higher education

In his goal setting, Kunal believes in prioritising and allocating time for everything that is important to him. Even while he's completing his master programme in the next few months, he has already started searching for possible options for his doctoral journey and plans to visit university study fairs to gather information.

Some pursue a doctorate as they need it for a research or teaching career. Others want to obtain it for self-actualisation. "For me, it's for both reasons," Kunal confessed. "I may be moving into R & D in future," he added.

Quite an achievement for someone who had stopped his education at a vocational institute 17 years ago. Better late than never, as Kunal has more than amply exemplified.

- Joachim Sim, author of 2018 book "[Learning For Life: Stories That Inspire](#)", which was supported by SkillsFuture Singapore