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Influencers need to study too

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While gig work can be lucrative, paper qualifications are still important

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WITH the rise of social media and digital platforms, a new aspiration has emerged among Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) leavers: to become influencers.

Social media influencing has become such a way of life for young Malaysians that a number of them say they are interested to carve out a career in the captivating world of social media influence, instead of embarking on the traditional higher education path.

According to the UCSI Poll Research Centre, some 490 out of 1,000 respondents of its study say they do not want to pursue further studies, and 34% of this group aged between 18 and 20 want to be social media influencers or affiliates (see *infographics*).

The study on post-SPM pursuits was conducted in March with this group of SPM school-leavers saying they wanted to create content for online platforms instead of furthering their studies.

UCSI Poll Research Centre chief executive officer Assoc Prof Dr Pek Chuen Khue said becoming an influencer is an "almost irresistible" career option because it offers creative freedom, good earning potential, and the opportunity to make an impact.

"An influencer, or KOL (key opinion leader) with a strong following, can earn anything from RM1,700 to RM3,000 per post. "Naturally, being young, they would gravitate towards doing this rather than getting a traditional job or continuing their studies because they think being an influencer allows them to be financially stable, independent, and able to support their dream lifestyles.

"Just like fresh graduates, post-SPM students take a keen interest

in the job market. Perhaps becoming an influencer looks more attractive to some now because they see their friends with a paper qualification earning less than those without," Pek told *StarEdu*.

Sharing that her son had once aspired to become a YouTuber, Monash University Malaysia

Economics Department head Dr Grace Lee Hooi Year said when school-leavers choose to become influencers instead of pursuing higher education after the SPM, it can be challenging for parents and family members who may have more traditional views about what constitutes a successful career and the importance of tertiary education.

Lee, who is also the varsity's associate professor of economics, said instead of being dismissive, parents and teachers should attempt to engage with students (see *infographics*).

"Introduce the 'Practical Trial' concept to your teens. Encourage them to initiate their influencing journey while highlighting how success may not be as easily attainable as they think.

"This could serve as a reality check as the glamorised influencer lifestyle they see online is not necessarily the norm.

"For every influencer who has gained a significant following, there are many more who struggle to achieve the required hits before they actually make money," she said, adding that encouraging them to dabble in it before deciding on their next career moves gives them firsthand exposure to the challenges involved.

Not a bed of roses

Fostering an awareness of failed cases is crucial to provide a balanced perspective even if the teen has already made up his or her mind to become an influencer, Lee said.

While it is important to

acknowledge the success stories, she stressed that it is equally important to expose them to instances where individuals have faced difficulties or failed.

This, she said, could involve discussing real stories of influencers who struggled to establish their brands, faced mental health issues, and discovered how financially unstable the career can be.

She suggested that parents and teachers facilitate conversations on these unsuccessful cases to help teens understand the potential risks and challenges associated with becoming an influencer. "It's essential to stress that success in this field, as in any other, is not guaranteed and requires persistent effort, strategic planning and sometimes, a stroke of luck.

"Additionally, parents and educators could offer to put kids in touch with industry experts who can discuss their triumphs and disappointments, and offer them useful advice.

"Real-world experiences can often shed light on things that academic knowledge cannot.

"The goal should not be to discourage teens from following their passion, but rather to make sure they are prepared with a realistic grasp of what the path may involve.

"Create an environment where the teens have access to balanced knowledge, real-world experience, encouragement and guidance so that they are able to make wise judgments regarding their professional paths," she advised.

Education matters

Relying on social media as a career path has its drawbacks, Multimedia University (MMU) deputy dean (Students Experience and Alumni) and postgraduate programme coordinator Dr Mokhtarudin Ahmad cautioned.

Higher education, he said, helps mitigate those challenges.

The popularity of social media platforms can fluctuate, he said, pointing out that if one platform loses prominence or undergoes significant changes, an influencer's career could be jeopardised.



Pek



Lee



Help! My child wants to be an INFLUENCER

Tips for parents on how to engage with their teens who don't want to continue studying:

Open dialogue

Engage in an open and honest conversation with your teens about their decision. Understand their motivations behind becoming an influencer, and their long-term goals, and how they plan to achieve them.

Research together

Encourage your teens to research and understand the implications and potential challenges of being an influencer. This could include understanding the business side of influencing, such as managing contracts and finances, as well as the potential impact on their privacy and mental health.

Source: Monash University Malaysia Economics department head and Associate Professor of Economics Dr Grace Lee Hooi Year

Promote skills development

Encourage your teens to continue learning and developing skills, both within and beyond a formal education setting. This could include short courses in video editing, social media management or photography.

Support and monitor

Provide emotional support to your teens as they navigate their new careers, and monitor their online activities to ensure their safety.

MENTAL PHYSICAL

Emphasise balance

Encourage your teens to maintain a balance in life. This means setting boundaries for work, continuing to interact socially outside of their online presence, and ensuring they maintain their physical and mental health.

The Stargraphics



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Our post-SPM journey

“ Having completed my SPM exams recently and achieved 11As, I look forward to completing my foundation in science course by early next year. I admire SPM leavers who have the courage to pursue the social media influencing pathway. I enjoy watching reels of Singaporean and Malaysian comedy influencers on social media because of the originality of their content and how deeply their words resonate with me in my daily life. Certainly, the conventional pathway after completing the SPM is to pursue pre-university studies, but this route may not suit the needs of everyone. ”

– Goh Li Lian, 18



“ I was already an influencer even before I sat for the SPM 2022 exams. Even without a degree, I am able to earn good money so I am just going to continue doing it, especially with tertiary education being so expensive and the cost of living constantly on the rise. The basic salary of a fresh graduate is so much lower than what I'm currently earning through paid partnerships and doing livestreams. My parents are not well-to-do either and I do not want to be burdened by debts. ”

– Influencer who only wants to be known as Amirah

“ Becoming an influencer was an incredible journey but it was one that I stumbled on. It's like having a full-time job that constantly demands creativity. My passion for acting led me to TikTok, where I could showcase my talent through short, dialogue-filled videos. The initial excitement of creating acting content was indescribable but as time went on, I felt the need for something fresh. So, I decided to dive into the world of jewellery and beauty product reviews, and it was fun but eventually, that too lost its charm. Never one to shy away from trying new things, I ventured into making funny content with my friends, which definitely brought some laughs, but even that became repetitive. In the end, I realised that the key to true fulfilment was to be genuine and authentic. Embracing my passion for singing, I now perform with my band, and it's a dream come true! I also do some freelance work in retail and business. I've been able to generate a steady income and even splurge on things I've always wanted. As a girl who loves to indulge in life's

pleasures, freelancing empowers me to pursue my dreams and be in control of my earnings. The freedom and flexibility is truly priceless as it gives me work-life balance. I can channel my skills and talents to various projects, constantly learning and growing as I go along. I intend to go to college, though not anytime soon. ”

– Singer and influencer Nur Melissa Shawaluddin, 18



Higher education can help influencers gain skills and knowledge that transcend specific platforms, allowing them to adapt and flourish regardless of how the social media landscape evolves, said Mokhtarrudin.

“Typically, social media work can be unpredictable. And it's a solitary endeavour. ”

“Algorithms evolve, new platforms emerge and trends change. The social media landscape is constantly evolving so influencers must keep abreast of new trends, algorithms and features. ”

“A degree can provide a contingency plan and offer alternative career opportunities, which ensures career stability and helps expand their skill sets. ”

“Certain knowledge and critical thinking skills that you pick up in degree courses like digital marketing and media studies can really help you navigate these changes,” he said.

Ravi Prasath Poongkuntran, a popular TikToker who goes by the name Ravi Zephyr, said being an influencer offers sever-

al financial incentives that make it an attractive career option for school-leavers post-SPM.

Social media provides limitless potential for making money, especially if one has a substantial following and high engagement, he said.

As an influencer, there are various avenues to generate income, including brand collaborations, sponsorships, and even launching one's business, he

explained. Brand collaborations, in particular, can be lucrative, with influencers receiving payment for promoting products or services based on their reach, engagement and niche, the 23-year-old shared.

And having clout as an influencer can open doors to earning appearance fees or being compensated for attending exclusive events such as movie premieres, product launches or pop-up store events, in exchange for content creation on social media platforms, he added.

“There are many incentives, be it networking or financial inde-

pendence, that being an influencer offers but school-leavers should not give up on higher education even if they want to do this. ”

“The success and longevity of an influencer is not guaranteed. Even established influencers rely heavily on brand campaigns for their earnings, which means that a monthly paycheck is not guaranteed. ”

“Additionally, maintaining consistent campaign collaborations requires you to stay relevant and post consistently, which can be mentally draining. ”

“The fast-paced nature of the entertainment industry adds to the pressure of creating content that builds the brand and focuses on longevity, rather than simply chasing trends for temporary viral success,” he said.

Ravi Prasath, who is studying engineering, advises aspiring influencers to continue their studies.

“I'm going to sound like an old boomer grandfather but as someone who is pursuing higher education while being a content

creator, I can confidently say that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages if we only consider the influencer career path. ”

“Don't give up on an education just to be an influencer. Try to balance both pursuits. It will require some effort since you need to be consistent with your content, but that doesn't mean you have to post every single day,” he said.

Influencers, said Lee, are part of the gig economy, which contributes to the country's growth.

Legislation, she said, is essential to ensuring that gig workers are not marginalised.

“We must be able to recognise the value and potential of jobs in the gig economy. ”

“Such jobs provide flexibility and can cover vacancies in traditional employment sectors. ”

“It is crucial to provide gig workers with the same benefits as traditional employees to promote income stability. ”

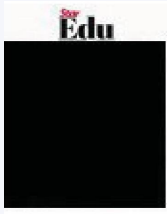
“This includes fundamental liberties such as the right to a minimum wage, sick leave, and social security benefits.”



Mokhtarrudin



Ravi Prasath



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SUMMARIES

Prudent for aspiring influencers to pursue tertiary studies, experts say. > 4 & 5 B Chasing the dream

Glitz and glam: A model posing as a social media influencer. - YAP CHEE HONG/The Star

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