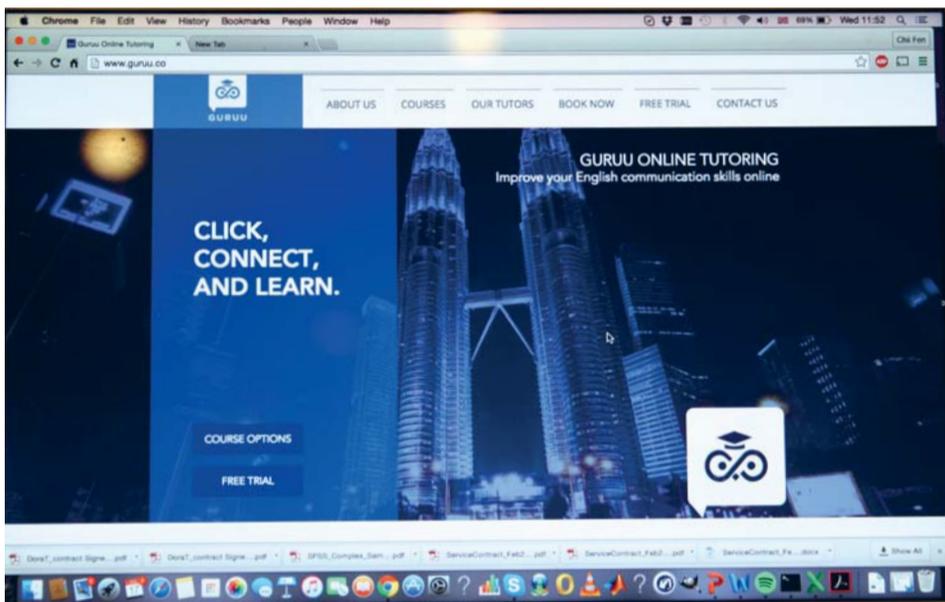


YOUNG 'GURUU' TAKES OVER ONLINE LEARNING

AMBITIOUS AND UNAFRAID TO TAKE RISKS, THE FOUNDERS OF GURUU SHARE THEIR STORY BEHIND THE FIRST EVER E-LEARNING PORTAL AIMED AT BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN MALAYSIAN STUDENTS AND INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS



By Milan Sadhwani

Irina Al Amin, Hiu Chii Fen and Kristyn Gan have been friends since secondary school which makes their collaboration in the form of Guruu that much rewarding and exciting. The trio of go-getters have never shied away from responsibility and when the idea of setting up an e-learning platform came about, they jumped at the chance and have not looked back since. These determined ladies embody the very essence of their pet project and hold it dear to their hearts.

WHAT CONVINCED YOU THAT THIS IS WHAT YOU WANTED TO DO?

Chii Fen: The three of us always wanted to start something together but we didn't want to go into something that was not meaningful. We wanted to do something we all felt strongly about. This had the added benefit of being online as I am based in Oxford, Kristyn is in London and Irina is based in KL. It was then that we identified this need in the market to improve the English in our country.

Irina: Personally it was an easy decision to make. What we are trying to achieve with Guruu is very close to my heart. I genuinely believe that our service increases value to society. I know a



lot of people would advise against working with your friends but the fact that we've known each other for 13 years and that we're actually high school friends works to our advantage. This is because we know each other's strengths and weaknesses and we're able to channel this into our business. We were confident that we could work well together. The timing also felt right as right now is the best time to venture into e-learning. There is a massive untapped market as our country is still lagging a few steps behind in terms of incorporating technology into education.

Kristyn: The combination of wanting to contribute to our local society by empowering Malaysians to reach their potential, and being able to do so with friends I've known and trusted my whole life.

ARE THERE ANY BACKGROUND OR CHILDHOOD INFLUENCES THAT LED TO YOU OPENING A BUSINESS?

Irina: Mine would definitely be my parents. They've always encouraged my siblings and I from a very young age to march to the beat of our own drums. That gave us the confidence to try new things and they always told us to not be afraid to make mistakes. That kind of support from your parents is very encouraging. They are my role models and I aspire to be like them in every way. My alma mater plays a role as well as they always encouraged us to take charge. Sri Cempaka was very good in moulding their students to be very independent. They gave us quite a free hand to set up charities, fund-raisers and such.

Chii Fen: My dad. He's a businessman himself who opened up his own family business and grew it from there. That definitely inspired me. The school we went to encouraged us to do many different things. It was definitely a great experience because we were encouraged to do things out of our comfort zone. We were involved in everything from swimming to debate. This helped us to have confidence.

We worked together before in school all the time as well so this is like an extension of our experiences. All three of us are very Guruu-focused despite whatever else is going on in our lives.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR PERSONALITY?

Irina: I would describe myself to be quite patient, very meticulous and organised. I like making checklist after checklist. I'm also a good listener. I handle student management so I am the point of contact for students. I think it is a good trait to have patience on the front line when you're running a business, especially when it's a startup. I think being organised really helps so you don't forget the little details.

Chii Fen: This is where we complement each other. I'm pretty disorganised, I'm an organised mess but I work really hard. I love to work and I enjoy a challenge. I'm an idea person, I get excited about ideas and I'm constantly coming up with things and texting my partners. I'm also passionate about things and definitely a people person. I manage all the tutors, and I enjoy it because I love interacting with people. I work on making sure that our tutors are happy with the way things are run.

DOES LEADERSHIP COME EASY TO YOU? WHAT IS YOUR MANAGEMENT STYLE?

Irina: I do feel it comes easy to me, I think partly that's because I'm confident in voicing my thoughts and opinions, my likes and dislikes. The fact that I am able to articulate my thoughts makes it easy for me to lead which boils down to my command of the language. And this is what we're trying to promote at Guruu - by improving your soft skills, you can build your confidence which can open up a whole new world for you, whether you take on a leadership role at home or at school. Or it could even give you the courage to try new things.

I like to communicate up front and I prefer to speak up immediately, whether good or bad. There's no time like the present. I feel that there should be a level of mutual respect between employee and employers.

Chii Fen: I think leadership does come easy to me and to all of us. In a business and society like this, it is important to have the language skills to be able to convey your ideas. I don't like to micro-manage, I'd like to be able to say, go ahead and run with that but I always want to be there for my employees and for people working with me. I don't really like being an over-arching typical sort of boss, I prefer that my employees are able to come and talk to me if they have problems rather than be afraid of being criticised and for me to be able to listen to them. I would like to spot talent where there is, and be able to foster and encourage that.



Kristyn: Yes! I love taking responsibility for something and that sense of accomplishment when you get something done and done well. I think humility and self-awareness are just as important in a good leader, as well as being bold and sticking with your gut instinct.

HOW DOES THE GURUU WEBSITE WORK?

Chii Fen: Students can go to the landing page for course options and pick from a variety of English subjects such as conversational or business context courses. There is also public speaking and grammar and diction with a big focus on how you use it in your speech. We also have more tailored options such as preparing for job interviews and document checks where you can submit your resumes. We have international tutors as well as some from Malaysia as well.

We give autonomy to students when choosing tutors and courses and we make it easy for them to sign up. Tutors have a short one-minute video introducing themselves where students can view this and see their learning styles.

Students need to be 13 years and above to sign up for a course. Our tutors are qualified to teach adults as well but we do focus a bit more on students, young students about to enter colleges, or graduates about to enter the workforce but there is no specific age requirement. We also offer free trial options. Ultimately, what we are offering is personalised one-on-one English tuition via Skype.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE ON THE SERVICE THAT YOUR COMPANY WAS GOING TO BE INVOLVED IN?

Chii Fen: We went through a lot of options and finally landed on Guruu because universally the word 'guru' is associated with teaching yet we want our focus to be very Malaysian-centric. The symbol connotes a wise owl with its little graduation hat and a chatbox signifying it's online. The website too is very Malaysian-focused because this is our primary target market.

Our selling point is that we're able to take international standards of learning, and make that learning accessible so that geography is not a barrier. If you want to learn from a UK tutor, you don't actually have to fly all the way there. It is



global teaching that is locally accessible.

Irina: We liked that it was a Malay word for teacher. We are focusing a lot on social media and digital advertising to utilise the advancement of Information Technology to get the word out to a bigger group at a faster rate, because our primary service is the Internet. Right now that's what we're focusing on.

While we do find it useful, we are also going to look into traditional media as we do want the parents to be aware of our services because they're the ones with the spending power.

WHAT DID YOU DO TO STAY TRUE TO YOUR BUSINESS PROPOSITION AND ABOVE YOUR COMPETITORS?

Chii Fen: We're working to grow our tutor database and making sure we vet our tutors for quality. I think that's going to differentiate us from anyone else who does this. We are also working with experts in the field to develop course content. We are very invested in making sure the quality is very good.

Irina: I believe it is also about quality in customer service. We strive to provide our students with the best customer service possible. We make a promise to reply to any feedback within 24 hours.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU TO BRAVE THE DAY FORTH?

Irina: Guruu inspires me, it is literally our little baby and we are all so invested in it. We just want the best for it and want to see it succeed. I don't want to let down my partners, I want it to do well. That's what inspires me on a daily basis.

Chii Fen: It's the response that we've received, we couldn't have guessed how it would turn out. There was so much support and enthusiasm, it really makes me feel that it will do something good for the country. The potential of making a difference in the market, in the country and in society is exciting.