Three Singapore graduates tell Swati Chaudhary what inspired them to success in university and their experiences in practical life

O MOST people, graduation is more than just a conferral of the knowledge gained in college. It symbolises the promise of a future, the dreams yet to be fulfilled, and, of course, an entry into the real world of work. It is sometimes cynically termed “the real world” — a world full of potential pitfalls and rude shocks. In a popular song of 2002, John Meyer, himself a college dropout, says: “I just found out that the truth is, that there is no such thing as a real world... I lie a little to get you to rise above.”

This week, BT speaks with three graduates who had been at the top of their class and who have now had some time in the real world of work. They tell us of their experiences and what inspired them to success in school. Next week, we will take a look at this year’s top graduates and explore their plans for the future.

ADRIAN YEO 27 Graduate from the School of Civil & Environmental Engineering, Nanyang Technological University

QUESTIONS of life interest Adrian Yeo. The 29-year-old graduated with first class honours in civil engineering in 2002 and went on to do his PhD with a waiver of all other mandatory master’s degree.

It was not a smooth transition, though. “I took a six-month sabbatical after graduation. I had studied on a scholarship from a construction firm and was bonded to it, but the company folded up right about the time I graduated. So, unlike most of my other friends, I had no open graduation. I was sometimes out of work and I was often in the middle of nowhere, half the time sitting on a floor covered in slime. And I am happy. And that is really all that matters.”

LEE KENG LEONG 27 Graduate from the School of Business, National University of Singapore

A LIFE full of regrets is not very appealing to Mr Lee as he looks on early into the interview. The business administration graduate is currently working as an analyst at PwC. It is so important and not always easy to fit into someone else’s plan. His friends think he is insouciant. He does not get paid, he is in the middle of nowhere, half the time sitting on a floor covered in slime. And he is happy. And that is really all that matters.

MS LIM was awarded a scholarship by leading international financial firms Credit Suisse and PwC. She was in the pioneer batch of the SMU’s accounting graduates, but was deterred by the university’s relative lack of reputation.

It is different to be part of the pioneer batch. It was as if we were part of history in the making. Also, the curriculum at the SMU is very applicable to the industry. I remember at the interview, the faculty asked me very personal questions. I felt like I personally mattered, not just my grades,” she says, adding that while she was at the university, “SMU felt like home”.

The former Victoria Junior College student, who confesses she was also at “an average student when I entered SMU”, is surprisingly forthright in explaining the importance of grades: “Chasing grades is not the way to go. Of course, that is not saying they are not important. Having good grades is sort of branding yourself, but it is not a guarantee that you will make it to the top. Once you are through to a job, no one cares what grades you had.”

Asked how she kept up her grades to become a valedictorian of her class, she says: “SMU taught me discipline, which quite frankly is helping me tremendously now as well, I am not a genius. I studied about four to five hours a day. I used to finish all my readings before class. I like to start early. For a 12 o’clock class, I used to go to school around 8 and study before class. Even now, I often get to work before most people.”

“I had a short-term plan to pursue an MBA, at a prestigious institute overseas. I’ve just completed my job at PwC and started my corporate tax department job in PwC Singapore’s corporate tax department.

‘Degrees, grades — it is all so insignificant in the greater scheme of things... Success is not a given. Of course, you are going to fail at some point. Singaporeans do not react positively to failure. But failure is never an end.’

— Adrian Yeo

"It felt different to be part of the pioneer batch (at the SMU). It was as if we were part of history in the making."

- Lim Ke Xin

"I honestly believe that life is more than work. You get back a lot more in return if you give."

- Leo Keng Leong