

HELP AT A SNAP



PHOTO TIFFANY GOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

A crop of new mobile or Web tuition apps have entered the Singapore market in the past year or so, offering to share images of maths or science questions to get them answered by the agency's base of 45,000 tutors, or other users.

Co-founder Lai Weichang, 35, said the app allowed for multiple users to respond to the same question, so that users can see the different ways of solving one question.

At least half of the apps IN reviewed involve users using them to take pictures of the questions

they needed help with. The apps then source for answers from tutors or other users.

IN meets the makers of six such apps and finds out how they work.



Although this app offers incentives, the overall user experience was not ideal.

QUERI

This locally produced app helps students get answers to their questions through a bidding system. A user poses a question and sets a number of credits to be earned. Other users then bid for the right to reply – and earn the credits.

However, sometimes a user, hoping to get an answer out of goodwill, posts a question that offers zero credits.

Queri co-developer Dexter Tan, 32, said: "I know there are platforms out there where you can ask questions for free, but the harder questions tend to go unanswered. People will want to be rewarded for their time."

Credits cost more to buy than to cash out and Queri earns the difference.

By the end of last year, it had garnered close to 10,000 downloads since its beta version was launched at the end of 2015.

HOW IT WORKS
A user has 22 categories to list his questions for other users to answer.

A user buys credits (five credits for \$10; 20 credits for \$25) and assigns them to questions as incentives for other users to answer and earn. First-time users get two free credits when they create an account.

Abigail: I felt that Queri's layout was a bit crowded. The "timer" feature was also confusing and not very useful, as only one person bid to answer my question after five hours. I was forced to accept the time proposed by the other side in order to answer my

long-neglected question. I like that you could earn credits by answering other questions, but as a whole using the app was too clunky for me to want to use again.

Asa: Bids for my questions came in only after they had been posted for about an hour.

Due to the lack of bidders, I had to agree for my questions to be answered for one credit each within the time limit of 137 minutes, though I had intended them to be done in 30 minutes for zero credits.

Even then, my questions were not answered after more than 24 hours. It totally is not worth the price of the credits.



ANG YIYING recruits interns ABIGAIL ANG and IMMANUELA ASA RAHADINI to put tuition apps to the test

ASK.MANYTUTORS

For tuition agency ManyTutors, its free app Ask.ManyTutors is a way for it to publicise its current business, where it gets a referral fee for matching tutors to students.

The app, launched in October last year, allows users to share images of maths or science questions to get them answered by the agency's base of 45,000 tutors, or other users.

When tutors answer questions, their solutions or workings are also posted to their online profile. Mr Lai reckoned that this function ensured accountability.

He added: "Because the ask-manytutors.com platform is public, tutors are very wary when they post as this affects their profile. So tutors do everything to ensure that their answers are correct."



HOW IT WORKS
A user takes pictures of his maths or science questions and uploads them into the app to be answered by the tuition agency's pool of 45,000 tutors or other users. It is free to use.

Abigail: I found the app design a bit dull. It also does not allow you to upload photos from your photo gallery, which was inconvenient. I also faced some technical issues.

However, my questions received answers within an hour and they were accurate and detailed. As I usually do not need an instant response, I find it useful for revision and practice.

Asa: The app's interface is not aesthetically appealing but it is very reliable in assisting users to get answers in no time. The overall experience was satisfying as both my questions were addressed promptly and accurately. I would keep this app!

THE TESTS

IN interns Abigail Ang and Immanuela Asa Rahadini tested the tuition apps while doing their homework.

They each uploaded two maths questions to apps that promised to help with answers at different times of the day.

For apps that help students look for a private tutor, they used them as though they were looking for one to help with their weaker subjects.

The apps were judged based on their design, ease of use and speed and accuracy of the answers.

Abigail is from Raffles Girls' School and Asa is from Anglo-Chinese Junior College. At the time of their internships, Abigail was in Sec 4 and Asa was in JC1.

SNAPASK

This paid app originates from Hong Kong.

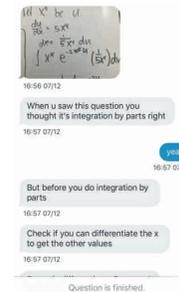
It positions itself as a platform where students can get their questions answered at any hour by matching students with tutors who can explain the solutions.

Mr Lee Wei Meng, 31, Snapask's Singapore head of customer success, said: "We try as much as possible to match when our tutors are online to when demand for questions to be answered is highest."

He said the app helps parents with little time to help their children with schoolwork.

Snapask sells monthly packages to student users based on the number of questions they can ask.

It has operated in Singapore since November 2015, counting 20 per cent of its 7,800 tutor users and 150,000 student users from the Republic, including those on free trials.



The interns found the app useful as they were able to get tutors at almost any time. However, the steep price for each question put them off using it regularly.

HOW IT WORKS
A user sends a photo of his question via the app to be answered. The number of queries he can send depends on the package he buys.

Monthly packages are priced at \$25 for five questions, \$55 for 15 questions and \$118 for an unlimited number of questions.

Abigail: The app's minimalist design was pleasing to my eye. It was easy to use and the tutors were friendly. They also checked if I understood each step of the working.

This was my favourite app out of the ones I tested. However, the price is too steep. I would definitely use it if each question was \$2 or less, and only if the question was very challenging.

Asa: This app is quite reliable. There were more than 600 tutors online even at 1.30am. It was excellent in matching students with a tutor, but the promptness and accuracy of responses may vary. For instance, one of my tutors completed his explanation in four hours. Also, I don't think I would be able to afford it by myself, it is really costly.

LEARNLY

This free app was inspired by elements from matchmaking apps.

Its co-founder and chief executive Joel Khoo, 27, had actually been exploring building a dating app. However, a friend's negative experience with a tuition agency pushed him to look into making an app to connect tutors and students.

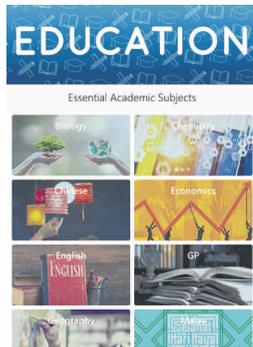
He said: "Consumers are increasingly familiar with on-demand service apps such as Grab (transport), Deliveroo (food), Vanitee (beauty). These apps provide transparent prices and con-

venience without the use of physical cash."

Other than connecting students looking for tutors of academic subjects, it also has a lifestyle section where students can look for teachers in yoga or music, for instance.

Launched at the beginning of last year, it has garnered some 4,000 registered users by the end of last year.

It intends to be a free app with a "freemium" model – with chargeable premium functions for tutors to schedule classes or collect payment.



The interns had different responses to the app in which tutors offer their services (above) in response to a user's requirements. The app offers a wide range of lessons (left).

HOW IT WORKS
A user creates requests for tutors or browses tutors' profiles, while tutors list their expertise in different academic subjects or enrichment lessons.

Students can look at tutors' schedules and message them in-app.
It is free to use.

Abigail: The app looked professional but also fun and interesting.
It was quite efficient as I was contacted by four teachers within two days of making an inquiry, which all tutors could respond to. However, it felt like a Google search for tutors as the tutors were not sorted by qualifications.

What I really liked was the app's Lifestyle section which featured tutors for a wide range of sports, hobbies and languages.

Asa: The app's interface is a bit too childish for my liking.
To my disappointment, I received only one response for my inquiry for a maths tutor after 24 hours.

Nevertheless, the app also has a lifestyle section which allows users to explore interesting activities from Yoga to learning C++ coding language. It also allows users to see the profile of tutors who advertise themselves or respond to users' queries.

YODAA

Wanting to combine the credibility of word-of-mouth recommendations with convenience for those looking for tutors, Mr Samuel Huang, 28, and his friends came up with the idea for this free Web app.

A user fills up a form with his requirements for tutors and then receives suitable tutors' profiles with quotes within 24 hours.

To set itself apart, Yodaa actively recruited experienced tutors. Another criteria: tutors must have people willing to vouch for them.

Said Mr Huang: "They must have references."

Currently in the open beta phase since November 2015, it receives about 80 to 100 tutor requests a month.

Mr Huang said his team is exploring ways to make money from the app but it remains free for now.



The tutors matched to the interns had relevant experience and reviews from other students.

HOW IT WORKS
A user fills in a short survey and get notifications by e-mail and text messages when he is linked to a relevant tutor. The app promises to provide five customised tutor quotes within 24 hours.

The app is free to use for now.

Abigail: Yodaa linked me to five tutors tailored to my personal information, such as my location, school, and preferred frequency of lessons.
It felt like a professional recommendation service and I would not mind using this to search for tutors.

Asa: I received five recommendations within 12 hours. Tutors who were recommended earlier had the best credentials, higher ratings and terrific testimonials – also, higher fees.
On the other hand, the last two tutors whom the app recommended offered tuition at a more affordable rate, but they had less convincing credentials. I would use this to look for a tutor.

MIAO

Working as tutor while she was a student motivated Ms Betty Zhou, 25, to think of a more efficient way for students to get homework help.

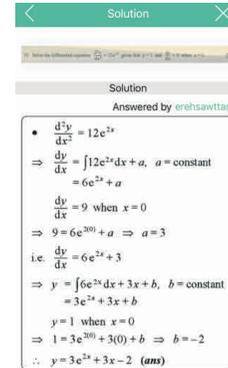
Together with a few friends, she came up with the idea of this free maths app, which released its beta version in October last year.

One main factor sets it apart from other homework or tuition apps meant for Singapore students: It does not rely on people, but on artificial intelligence that does not provide outright answers.

When a user snaps a photo of his question, the app uses natural language processing algorithms to analyse the question and turns up information related to it and other similar practice questions.

Ms Zhou, who is Miao's co-founder and chief executive, said: "It's not a solution solver. It's more like a learning tool."

It eventually hopes to add on premium functions that will come at a price, while keeping basic functions free.



This app relies on existing data to provide information related to the answers, which the interns found not relevant as they wanted their queries answered.

HOW IT WORKS
A user snaps images of his maths questions and the app will display related information or similar practice questions as learning aids for students.

At the time of review, it covered only the A-level curriculum. It recently extended to covering the O-level syllabus.

Abigail: The app was simple to use and had a cute design. However, the questions they provided me were not very relevant to my question.
This app could be useful for finding practice questions, but not very useful to solve a question you currently have.

Asa: It works only in analysing simpler maths problems and, in my case, the app recommended a variety of similar questions without actually assisting me in answering the question that I already had posted.

REVIEWS

GOTIT

HOW IT WORKS
Students post pictures of their questions, which will be answered by a tutor within 10 minutes.

Within that period of time, students may clarify the responses given by the tutors. The app promises to provide another 10-minute session for free if the previous answer was unsatisfactory.

A question is worth eight credits (US\$1.99 or S\$2.90). Users can get free credits by answering a daily quiz.

Abigail: The app provided the correct solution quickly, but the time limit made the chat very rushed and there was not much time to absorb the information.

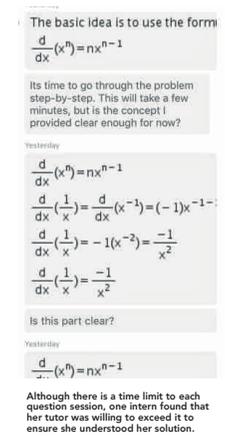
I also could not ask follow-up questions once the session had ended.

Overall, I found it too expensive because of the rushed one-off tutoring.

Asa: The word problem that I posted was wrongly detected as a list of questions, hence the system refused to match me with a tutor.

The other question was answered successfully. Even though the tutor exceeded the 10-minute limit in the chatroom, he was still committed to give a detailed explanation.

This app also allows users to get free credits by answering a daily quiz. I will definitely keep this app in my phone.



PHOTOMATH

HOW IT WORKS
A user can snap a photo of algebra questions within the app, or type the question manually using the calculator functions provided.

It then gives a step-by-step solution instantaneously.

The app works only for algebra question and is free to use.

Abigail: Although this app can answer only algebra questions, I fell in love with its sleek, professional design and instantaneous answers.

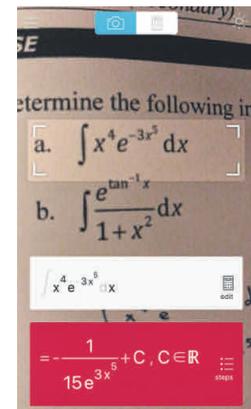
Its camera and a manual input option were easy to use.

Although it may not work for long questions, I found it very useful for checking workings. Definitely keeping this one for homework!

Asa: The app was able to scan my question in no time and almost instantaneously offered an accurate solution.

Unfortunately, it could not solve word problems or questions that involve substitutions.

Nevertheless, the overall experience was magical.



The speed at which the app answered algebra questions impressed the interns, but they found its scope to be limited.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Abigail: I'm keeping Photomath, Ask.ManyTutors and Learnly. With Learnly, I may finally start to pick up another language.

Asa: My favourite apps are Yodaa, Photomath and Ask.ManyTutors. I am totally going to keep using them.