Survey shows top earner getting $20,000; 2 in 3 graduates have found jobs

ACCOUNTING graduate Clarence Lew will stride across the stage in his cap and gown to receive his honours degree scroll on Saturday, but he is already in a select club of fresh graduates earning close to a five-figure salary.

Offered a job as a sales analyst by a top-tier investment bank last December, the 23-year-old started work about five weeks ago, after his final examination at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

Mr Lew declined to give his exact salary, and said it is close to $10,000.

He said he had applied to at least 10 different banks and financial institutions last year, and picked his current employer because it was the first to make him an offer.

Some companies must be pulling in the cream of the crop by dangling attractive salary packages. A preliminary survey done by NTU on this graduating class found a number drawing salaries like Mr Lew's.

Some companies must be quick on the draw to snag the brightest and most talented.

Both declined to be named.

Some graduates have taken the route of becoming their own bosses.

Mr Lester Lin, 25, for example, started his own science tuition-and-enrichment business, Science Hub, three years ago, and now earns more than $12,000 a month as a co-owner of Science Hub and a major shareholder and director of Math & Science Olympiad, another tuition-and-enrichment business.

NTU said it does not have data on the average starting salary of this year's graduates, nor figures on previous years' highest earners.

But, at stratospheric salaries or not, two-thirds of this crop of NTU graduates have already landed jobs, its survey found.

One graduate in computer engineering will be paid a starting salary of $10,000 as a software engineer.

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Mr Josh Goh, assistant director of corporate services at recruitment firm The GMP Group, said fewer than 10 people here secure five-figure salaries fresh out of university every year.

He added that the labour market is now tight, especially in the finance, retail and engineering sectors.

Mr Lew believes soft skills and his personality won him the lucrative job.

"During the interview, they probably felt I was the right fit for the company and the team," he said.

"We do a lot of relationship management, so soft skills and personality come into play, not just academic knowledge."

His 12-hour workdays are not an issue.

He said: "I think it's reasonable for this industry. The work-life balance is fine."

At yesterday's convocation ceremony, 369 doctorate, master's and bachelor's students from four schools and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, an autonomous institute, received their scrolls.

President S R Nathan, the chancellor of NTU, and Education Minister Heng Swee Keat were present to witness the inauguration of Professor Bertil Andersson as the university's third president.

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen and his wife also attended the ceremony to watch their daughter Jill, 23, graduate with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Communication.