Internships and varsity career offices clinch job for students

UNIVERSITY years are no longer just about academic work. Increasingly, they are also about preparing students for the job market.

Antiquating this, all three Singapore universities set up career service offices between 2003 and 2004, to be the bridge between employers looking for fresh blood, and students seeking their first permanent job.

More than the years, the career offices have moved from arranging simple job fairs and internship placements to frequent talks by prospective employers and overseas experiences.

"We believe that early exposure to the market gives our graduates a head start in the workplace," said Mrs Ruth Chang, director of career services at the Singapore Management University (SMU), the first university here to start such an office.

The efforts have begun to bear fruit.

Mr Ng Boon Hwang, director of the Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) career and attachment office, tells of daily requests from employers for graduates to fill vacancies immediately and of fully booked careers events.

For students, it can even bring job offers before their final exams.

Mr Chong Kwong Sheng, 24, who spent a semester at the University of Minnesota, said the experience challenged his world view.

"Interacting with people in the US resulted in me re-examining my stereotypes of them," he said.

He is one of 320 SMU students who went on the exchange programme last year.

NTU's first batch of students who spent six months working abroad reported receiving a starting pay of at least $250 more than their peers who stayed home.

Management trainee Wang Qin, who is interning with vehicle maker Tata Motors in Mumbai, feels he is cut above the rest because of his ability to navigate a different culture.

"If I can work in an emerging economy where the living conditions aren't that good, then I'm confident I can work anywhere," said the 25-year-old, a final-year student at SMU.

Going global

With nearly everyone securing internships, some students are going further - literally - to get ahead.

All three Singapore universities offer a variety of overseas opportunities, including exchange programmes, internships, work-and-travel experiences, study trips and community service visits.

Among the top destinations are the United States, China and India.

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Playing matchmaker

Careers service centres are also mini-education institutions in their own right.

Through career coaching and workshops on networking, resume writing and even personal grooming, these centres make the already simple task of getting a job - thanks to the booming economy - even simpler.

But the universities do not stop at just helping students prepare for the job. They are playing matchmaker as well.

Employers looking to hire often knock on the doors of career offices, asking to meet students at career fairs and recruitment talks.

During hiring season, the campuses are like one large recruitment office. As many as 25 per cent of NTU's Class of 2006 got their first job this way, up from just 25 per cent last year.

SMU also compiles its students' resumes into a database, as well as on CD-ROMs, making it easy for employers to choose suitable candidates.

Finance and marketing graduate Grace Chai, 23, for instance, was offered her corporate finance job at accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers without sending out a single job application.

"I only had to give my resume to the career office, and they took care of every-thing," said Chai.

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GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR: Fresh graduate Vikram Singh's stint at human relations training firm Dale Carnegie helped him land a full-time job as a consultant there after graduation. This year, SMU, NTU and NUS will place about 6,500 students on internships.

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