

RECESSION PLAN

Internships for free

Poly will pay allowances, if firm can't afford it, as part of \$2m package to help fresh graduates

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AS AN employer you are keen on internship programmes, but the worsening downturn and your limited budget is making you rethink the cost.

One polytechnic is hoping to sway the balance with an unprecedented move – by offering to pay its graduate interns' allowances.

Work attachments are an opportunity, made even more precious in this tough job market, for students to get experience and a foot in the door of full-time employment. Which is why Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NP) is earmarking \$600,000 to fund the internship allowances, where necessary, of graduates of its 16 new Specialist Diploma programmes.

"If companies find it difficult to provide an allowance, we are prepared to use our internal funds to support the graduate interns with an allowance of up to \$300 a month," said principal Chia Mia Chiang.

Ngee Ann is the first local tertiary institution to unveil a detailed budget aimed at helping its graduating cohort meet the challenges of the recession. And its \$2-million package sets a high benchmark.

The polytechnic will create 50 jobs for fresh graduates, to the tune of \$900,000, by speeding up its capability development plans. It will also offer interest-free study loans to help 100 graduates pursue degree studies at private universities here.

The school began developing the measures last October, said Mr Chia. Its graduating cohort, excluding those enlisting in National Service, numbers 2,300.

Although the downturn has not yet affected the number of industry internship places, Mr Chia felt it was important to "pre-empt" the situation. "It could become a burden (for companies) to take on

the additional interns from the Specialist Diploma programmes, and things are going to get worse."

NP will talk with a prospective employer and assess the circumstances before deciding whether to offer support for the allowances.

But would permanent employees balk at the idea of their company taking in interns for free, in a time of downsizing?

This is not an issue in a growing industry like life sciences – one of the industries in which NP has confirmed internship partners. The others are in engineering, healthcare and enterprise.

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GE Healthcare (Life Sciences) sales manager Sophia Lim told TODAY: "We're a lean company and the staff can see that we need the extra manpower to handle our projects."

Interns are a welcome solution when there is pressure against expanding headcount in a recession. But GE Healthcare plans to pay them out of its own pocket. "I think it's the right thing for a company to do, and you never know, companies might not use interns wisely if they're not paying for them."

WHAT OTHER INSTITUTIONS ARE DOING

Like NP, Singapore Polytechnic (SP) and Temasek Polytechnic (TP) are offering some on-campus jobs, such as in research and development.

Nanyang Polytechnic and TP are expanding their range of Specialist Diplomas – which qualify for Government training subsidies – to offer students more avenues of further study after they graduate.

The National University of Singapore hopes to initiate graduate internship opportunities with local enterprises through government agencies.

Last week, it signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Singapore Business Federation to collaborate on employment and attachment opportunities.

The Singapore Management University has planned 70 career fairs for the first three months of the year – its most ever – while the Nanyang Technological University said it is engaging SMEs and overseas companies to create extra recruitment channels.

The Education Ministry has suspended tertiary tuition fee loan repayment for a year.

Ms Nadia M Chand, 21, who graduates from NP this year, said: "I was worried about what to do after I graduate. Furthering my studies would have been a financial burden for my family at this time; but finding a job is also difficult. So what the school is doing gives me more options."