

# Overseas internships gaining favour among students

**They cite training, experience and exposure that such placements give**

By **TIMOTHY LOH**

ADAMSON Alagan had a Wunder-ful surprise after a six-month traineeship stint last year in the New York headquarters of global marketing powerhouse Wunderman. He was offered a job as the company's chief of staff – a position that typically requires at least five years' experience. Mr Alagan was then still an undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

Success stories such as his are uncommon, but overseas internships are indeed becoming increasingly popular among local students. While the US, China and India are still the places of choice, more exotic locales such as South Korea, Mexico and the Middle East have gained traction among undergraduates in recent times.

NTU and Singapore Management University (SMU) both report sending an average of 300 students each for overseas internships a year, while the National University of Singapore (NUS) says that about half of its 26,000 students have some form of overseas educational exposure, though not necessarily in the form of internships.

These numbers do not paint the entire picture,

however, as many students are allowed and, indeed, encouraged to source their own internships outside of Singapore, the three universities said.

But securing an overseas internship is no easy feat.

Said Kam Chan Hin, associate provost of undergraduate education at NTU: "While we have more than enough overseas internship placements to cater for the number of applicants, popular internship locations, such as those in the US, can have a ratio of up to four applicants vying for one placement."

Mr Alagan told BT that, for his traineeship, he competed against applicants from Columbia University, Syracuse University, SMU and NTU for the two spots available at that time.

According to an NUS spokesman, bagging good internships has become "extremely competitive". Students are assessed not only on their results but also on their resume and aptitude, and applicants for international internships must attend an interview.

"In addition, the employers have also indicated their preference for students who possess traits such as maturity and strong adaptability to diverse cultures, being a self-starter, having excellent communication skills and the ability to speak the local languages," the spokesman said.

The pay for the internships also vary widely, from as low as S\$170 to as high as S\$800 a month. Even at Wunderman, "trainees do not get paid well", said Mr Alagan.

For the students interviewed by BT, however, money is not a strong motivating factor.

They are more interested in the less tangible benefits that an overseas internship can bring: experience, exposure and on-the-job training.

Rachel Lee, an NUS undergraduate, is currently interning in Pico Art International in South Korea as a Singapore Pavilion guide.

"I personally have interests in various fields, so instead of looking out for internships that promise stability, I would very much prefer one that offers excitement and experiences that are hard to come by.

"Overseas connections also give you access to an amazing network of people. For example, I was able to meet the CEOs of Korea's biggest media compa-

nies and several 'power bloggers' through this internship. These are opportunities that cannot be achieved had I chosen an internship in Singapore," she said.

SMU undergraduates Lee Tian Wei, Tan Zhi Yin and Rachel Heng, who began their internships in the Middle East last month, agree.

Ms Heng, an intern at Certis Cisco in Abu Dhabi, said: "I've always been interested in communications with different nationalities and having the experience to work with people from diverse backgrounds, so I thought an overseas internship would be good exposure for me."

Mr Lee hopes that his internship stint at Emaar Hospitality in Dubai will serve to "differentiate" him from other jobseekers in the future.

He said: "Your international exposure will give you a differently-shaped view from some of the students that secure their internships locally. So if the

company you choose to work in in the future wants to have business dealings with the Middle East, maybe you'll have an edge . . . because you understand their business culture."

Ms Tan, who is especially interested in the tourism industry, sees her stint at Emaar Hospitality – which has undertaken projects such as the Dubai Mall and the Armani Hotels – as particularly valuable. "Being able to intern at (Emaar) will give me more opportunities in the future," she believes.

Sim Cher Young, director, Office of Career Services at SMU, said: "Students have said that (an overseas internship) adds flavour to a resume and some employers are partial to those who have had overseas exposure or overseas working experience."

Added an NUS spokesman: "Subject to the performance of the intern, there would also be the possibility for a conversion to full-time employment. Many companies use intern-

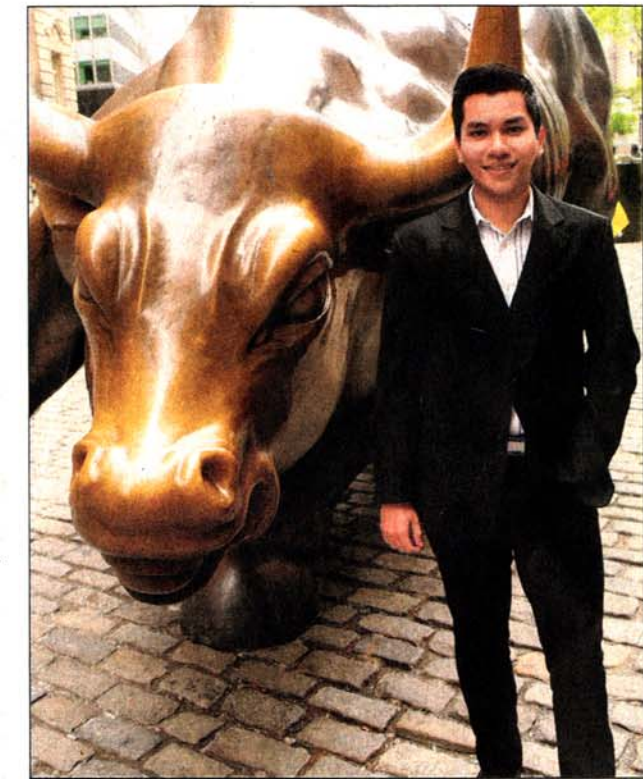
ships as a practical means for their talent pipeline and recruitment programme."

That point is borne out by Mr Alagan's experience and by statistics from NTU, which revealed that in 2010 alone, nearly 800 of some 4,000 students surveyed were offered jobs by their internship companies.

In recent years, a new model of student learning both inside and outside the classroom has also gained popularity.

NUS has been running its NUS Overseas College (NOC) programme for entrepreneurially-oriented students since 2001. Participants work as full-time interns in high-tech start-ups or innovative companies while taking entrepreneurship-related or discipline-based courses at partner universities. There are currently seven NOCs in the US, China, Sweden, India and Israel.

When the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) opens later this year, it will be collabo-



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rating with Zhejiang University (ZJU) in China to provide a yearly exchange programme for about 100 SUTD students. The programme will include an internship stint with Chinese companies, according to SUTD provost Chong Tow Chong.

Ultimately, overseas internships go some way in helping to train Singaporeans to function in a globalised economy.

"While a local intern-

ship offers the student a chance to experience work life, apply theories and validate career aspirations in industries or function, overseas internships add a special dimension to what an internship already offers the young mind – to experience a work environment different from that of Singapore, to be immersed in a different country's business, governmental and cross-cultural aspects," said Mr Sim.