

A Special Feature Brought to You By **Singapore Management University**



From left to right: SMU's Finishing Touch instructor Jonathan Kwan, director of Dato' Koh Hui Meng Career Centre, Sim Cher Young, student peer advisers (also known as Career Champions at the career centre) Ho Yan Yan, Leong Jing Hao, Ho Si Min and Kwok Wei Jie.

Taking career services to the next level

SMU is going the extra mile to not only help their graduates land their first job, but excel at it as well

TAX specialist Lim Kexin believes that she needs to have skills beyond her area of expertise to better tackle the increasingly complex challenges faced by her clients. This desire to add value in her job has helped her fuel a successful career at global accounting firm PwC, where she currently works at the company's Indonesian office.

"At work, I seek to be a valued business adviser having both a bird's eye view for strategy and depth for detail. I thus feel it is critical to deliver technical excellence not just in my niche area of tax," said Ms Lim, who at 31, is also the youngest council member of the Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants.

She graduated from the Singapore Management University (SMU) in 2005 with a Bachelor of Accountancy and a second major in law, winning multiple awards along the way and ending her time there as her cohort's Valedictorian. While she credits the SMU's academic rigour for giving her the necessary grounding to do her job, it was the university's focus on rounding off its students' education with a set of softer skills that she believes has given her an important edge in her career.

This extra-curricular training in areas such as effective networking, cover letter and résumé writing and business social etiquette is placed under SMU's Finishing Touch (FT) programme, a series of mandatory workshops aimed at preparing their students for the reality of working life.

Conducted by SMU's Dato' Koh Hui Meng Career Centre (DKHMCC), the FT programme prepares its students for working life by aligning their training initiatives with the needs of the market from the time they arrive at the university as freshmen.

The programme has so far focused primarily on helping graduates land their first job, whether through polishing up their interviewing techniques or refining their résumés to grab the attention of time challenged employers. S. Sri Saravanan, who graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Double Degree in BSc. (Economics) and BBM (Law) is one who has benefited from

the thorough pre-job preparation provided by the centre.

"SMU's FT programme equipped me with the skills to market and present myself in a positive and professional manner to my prospective employers. I was metamorphosed from a fresh graduate with hard knowledge to a business talent with added soft people skills," enthused Mr Saravanan, who is a procurement manager at multinational packaging firm Amcor.

The 30-year-old recognised the importance of such skills and attributed his success in securing seven job offers before sitting for his final exams, to the training he received at the career centre.

The DKHMCC, through its start-to-finish approach in preparing students for the workplace, organises a variety of networking events, career talks and company visits, among several career preparation resources. It provides career counselling to students and also ensures successful placement of students in internships and jobs by working closely with industry.

Recognising the importance and value of having real-world and career-relevant work experience for its students, SMU was the first university in Singapore to make internships compulsory for all students. The internship programme gives SMU students maximum benefits – exposure to working life, gain personal real-world perspectives and insights into career choices, and get a chance to build valuable business networks.

Such initiatives are clearly making an impact, with SMU's fresh graduates enjoying very high employment rate and high starting salaries across five of the university's degree programmes for the last ten years. The recent joint Graduate Employment Survey conducted by three autonomous universities in Singapore, namely Nanyang Technological University, National University of Singapore and SMU, revealed that graduates from SMU's 2013 cohort achieved higher employment rates and higher income than their peers. Some 92.3 per cent of SMU graduates gained employment within six months after

completing their final examinations with more than 86 per cent being offered jobs from before graduation to within the first two months of completing their final examinations.

For graduates who took up full-time permanent employment, some 55 per cent of them received two to six job offers.

Meeting the needs of employers

As part of its mission to align its training to market needs, the DKHMCC last year expanded its scope to not just helping its graduates get a job, but also to give them the skills necessary to excel in their chosen profession once they have entered it.

For example, based on feedback from employers, two new modules were added to the FT curriculum, one on "resilience" and the other on the "unwritten protocol" of the workplace. These two areas were identified by SMU's industry partners as the qualities lacking in the fresh graduates they hired. Case studies are used to demonstrate the importance of these two areas to students. More modules will be added in the future to get students career-ready.

"We speak to employers regularly as we need to be market relevant and be able to meet market place requirements. A degree will prepare you with cognitive skills, but employers are also looking for non-cognitive skills," said Sim Cher Young, DKHMCC's director who oversees a team of 15 staff.

According to Mr Sim, research shows that non-cognitive, or soft skills enhance interaction, job performance and career prospects.

Unfortunately, while such skills are highly prized by employers, they are often found lacking in entry-level hires.

Professional services organisation EY (Ernst & Young) said: "Fresh graduates, in general, given no or limited work experience, may tend to be 'book smart' and not necessarily work smart."

While fresh graduates may have the relevant technical skills and knowledge, they may lack the experience, judgment and ability to apply those skills and

knowledge to resolve specific business challenges.

EY, a multinational organisation that prides itself on being people-focused and building high-performing teams, added: "Some may also lack self-awareness in understanding work protocols and may face difficulties in adapting to the work culture. We have thus found that our experience in working with DKHMCC in the recruitment of SMU students, internships and employer engagement activities has been fruitful."

Through working with DKHMCC, EY and other employers are able to shortlist and arrange interviews for applicants to identify candidates and interns that are the right fit for their organisation.

Feedback from employers on the performance of SMU graduates is then channelled back to the university, and used to help their students better define their career aspirations and match their expectations with those of prospective employers.

The average SMU student completes between two and six industry internships throughout their four-year academic programme, attesting to the value these experiences bring, both to the student and the employer.

The rigorous engagement process with employers has helped students such as Kwok Wei Jie, a final year economics and business (double degree) undergraduate. "For me, the career initiatives at the DKHMCC nudged me in the right direction in terms of identifying my personal development goals and my career ambition. I couldn't give myself a satisfactory answer before then. The comprehensiveness of SMU's career preparation training gave me a better understanding of what I wanted to do," said Mr Kwok, 25.

He realised he needed to develop more career-related skills, which he has managed to do at the university. He said: "At SMU, I have grown much through various experiences and I know these will prove to be invaluable in the long run."

"For that, I am happy and grateful for the opportunities that are made available to me here," Mr Kwok added.

Providing the extra touches

APART from offering the internship and Finishing Touch programmes, SMU's Dato' Koh Hui Meng Career Centre offers complementary enrichment workshops to help students prepare for the corporate world. Workshop topics include "Surviving Your First 100 Days", "Fine Dining Etiquette", "Wine Appreciation" and skill-based workshops to help students navigate through the corporate world effectively.

For employers, they are given opportunities to network with students via recruitment activities that take place regularly.

The activities such as career fairs, recruitment talks, industry talks and company visits are geared towards building relationships between the students and employers early on. This is beneficial for both parties as students get to learn as much as they can about the organisation, and for the employer to engage students through internships and potentially, hiring them for employment after graduation.

Students are also encouraged to regularly meet with the university's career counsellors. Certified career counsellors at DKHMCC will conduct scheduled one-on-one sessions with students for career advice, consulting, provide résumé and cover letter critique, conduct mock interview sessions and administer various personality inventories.

DKHMCC also provides a résumé-builder programme for students creating their very first résumé to kick-start their internship and career applications.

This is the ninth in a monthly series by the Singapore Management University. Next month's feature will discuss the future of financial education in Singapore and Asia

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