

# More undergrads taking leave to pursue passions

**Many taking time out to volunteer overseas, start a business or do extra internships**

**Amelia Teng**

Most students would be satisfied with one exchange trip, but not 25-year-old Rax Suen.

After summer school in Mexico and an overseas college stint in India, the National University of Singapore (NUS) computing student took leave in his third year and went to Israel to intern at a social media management firm for six months.

Costs for the 2012 trip were covered by NUS while living expenses were paid with an allowance from the company.

The internship meant graduating half a year later than his peers, but he has no qualms about it. "I want to make the most of my uni life, by going abroad to work and gain skills, such as how to start a business."

He is among a growing number of undergraduates who are taking leave from school to pursue interests beyond books.

Instead of the usual three to four years to earn a degree, they take a "customised" approach, extending their study period to do an extra internship, volunteer overseas or start a business.

The trend is most evident at NUS, which has about 27,000 undergrads. About 340 of them took leave in the 2012 academic year, a 10 per cent increase from three years ago.

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU)



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Taking time off their studies to acquire new experiences and hone their skills are (from left) NTU's Fan Ming Wei; SMU's Wu Songjun; NUS' Rax Suen and Allan Teng; NTU's Low Yee Wee; and SMU's Ng Jia Hui.

said their numbers have remained stable, but did note that more are taking leave to intern or start a business.

At NTU, this has grown from just 10 students in 2009 to more than 60 last year. The university, which has over 23,000 undergrads, has been granting leave to about 150 students each semester since 2009.

NTU's associate provost for undergraduate education Kam Chan Hin said the school is "open to our students learning beyond the classroom and taking responsibility for their personal growth".

SMU, which has about 7,300 undergraduates, noted that three quarters of the 2.6 per cent who went on leave in the first semester of the last academic year did so for internships.

Students who took leave said they wanted to gain work experience, as they saw the value of learning skills which they cannot truly pick up in school.

Said 22-year-old SMU final-year business student Ng Jia Hui, who spent six months last year interning with the Ascott group in Dubai: "I wanted to step out of my comfort zone. I learnt a lot from colleagues from all over the world and their different views. In Singapore, most people tend to think the same."

A grant of over \$7,000 from government agency International Enterprise Singapore helped cover her living expenses there, and she also had an allowance of \$400 each month.

Some like NTU's Fan Ming Wei, 28, take time off to try their hand at starting businesses.

The final-year biological science student spent three years away from school – the maximum allowed at the university – to start two companies, including a 3-D bio-printing one, which prints cells, proteins and bacteria.

His own savings were used to set up the company, which plans to launch its product next month.

His schoolmate, Mr Low Yee Wee, 25, who also took leave last year to set up an events management company, said: "Work skills and what's taught in school are very different. You really learn how to manage your time and do things efficiently."

Mr Allan Teng, 23, a second-year business student at NUS, took a year off to work on personal projects like starting Jurong Lake Run, which raises money for beneficiaries.

The avid runner also created an online portal for race organisers to manage things like inventory management, and 15 events, like the Venus Run in March, will be making use of it.

"Being an entrepreneur is my first passion, so it doesn't matter if I graduate later," said Mr Teng, who also used his savings and got help from his father to fund the project.

Others like SMU business undergraduate Wu Songjun, 24, take leave for a social cause, like to teach English in Cambodia for half a year.

"My parents didn't think it was good to be away for so long," he said. "But it was a fresh experience, helping those not as privileged as us, but also learning from them."

"I have no regrets."

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