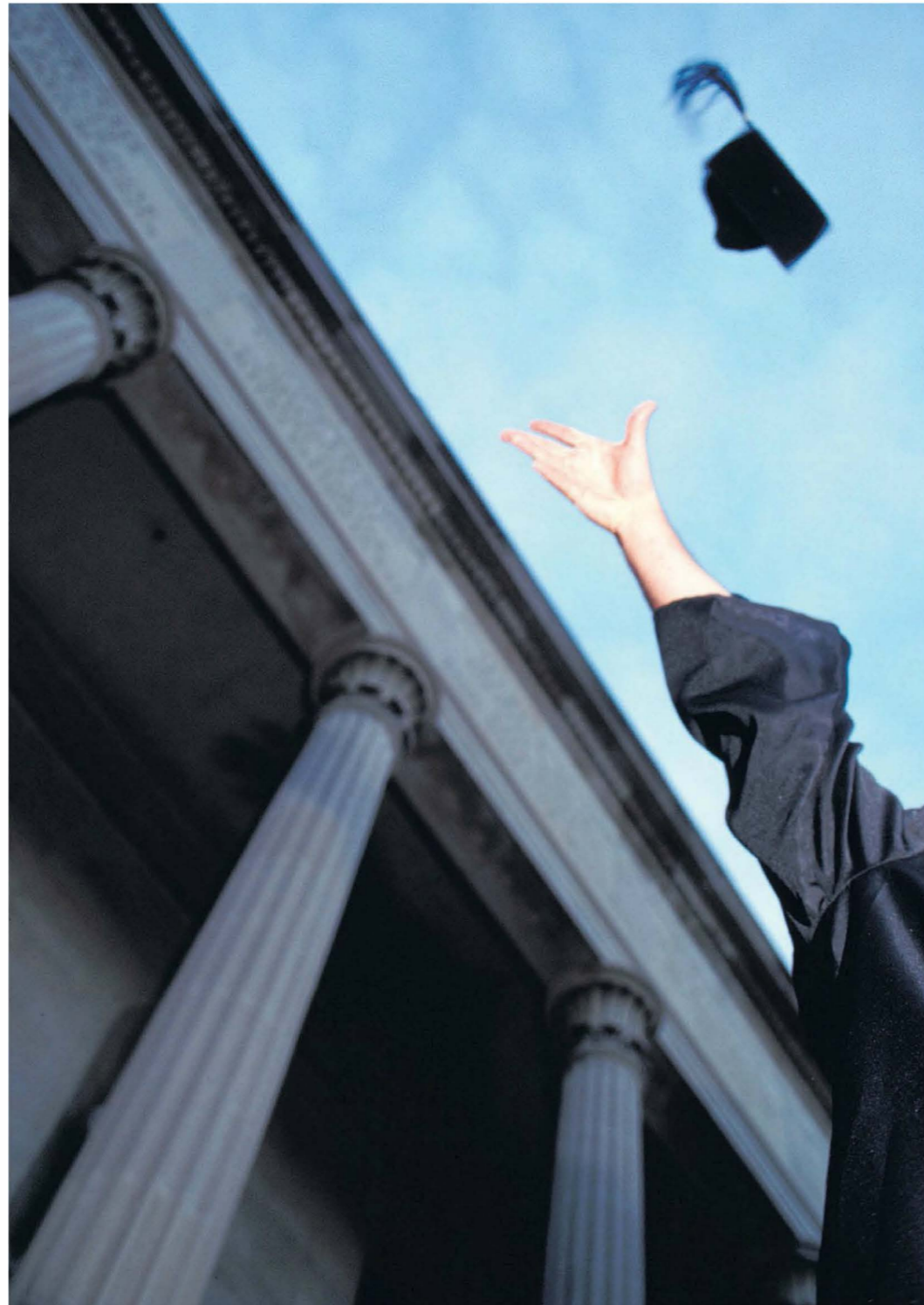


Higher studies to widen career options



Experts suggest several factors to consider when deciding whether to attend graduate school

BY TEH JOO LIN

MR CHOO Hong Xian's interest in public relations was stoked during a posting to the police force's public affairs department. So, in 2012, the history graduate enrolled in Singapore Management University for a master's degree in communication management.

He eventually hung up his uniform for a career in public relations. Now 35, the senior manager for media relations at a university reckons that the new qualification was "not an absolute necessity", but it helped in contact building within a new industry.

He says: "The main takeaway was the experience of learning, building new networks and getting a more macro perspective of the industry from guest speakers, professors or simply by talking to your classmates."

Having an additional qualification sometimes gives you an edge in landing your job or moving up that corporate ladder, but there is no guarantee. Look beyond qualifications as attitude, personality, cultural fit and leadership skills can also make or break your chance of getting the job offer or your next promotion.

- MR CLEMENT ONG, DEPUTY MANAGING DIRECTOR, NEXT CAREER CONSULTING GROUP, ASIA

It is common for those in the workforce to consider topping up their qualifications to angle for a promotion or even jumpstart a new career.

Last year, a MasterCard survey of some 8,000 respondents in Singapore and other Asia-Pacific countries found one in three intending to enrol in an educational course in the next year.

Mr Clement Ong, deputy managing director of NeXT Career Consulting Group, Asia, says learning and upgrading are required to remain "relevant, employable and to boost one's corporate value".

However, a decision on further education requires careful evaluation.

Further studies should be relevant to one's new role, whether one is attempting to scale the rungs or move into an equivalent job elsewhere, says Mr Kevin Ong,

director of executive compensation for South-east Asia at Towers Watson.

He adds: "For example, will the new knowledge or skill set acquired help the individual do a better job? Or is the new qualification required for the new role?"

Progression is tied to further qualifications in certain sectors.

For example, strategy consulting houses target graduates from top-tier Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes.

Mr Chris Mead, regional director of Hays in Singapore and Malaysia, says additional qualifications can prove advantageous in sectors with fewer job opportunities and more competition.

In sectors such as life sciences, researchers and scientists require further qualifications as they become more specialised.

Additional technical qualifications are also in order for employees in areas requiring high levels of technical knowledge due to ongoing technological changes.

Switching careers

According to Mr Kamal Kant, who lectures on subjects including career strategies, planning and management, career switchers may need to acquire some kind of certification or qualification to make a transition. However, this depends very much on the industry and type of work envisaged.

He adds: "In some instances, the previous experience may be sufficient to make the transition, but progress within the new industry or profession may require additional qualifications."

Mr Kevin Ong adds that additional qualifications are more likely needed when switching to a very technical or regulated area such as accountancy, nursing or physiotherapy.

Mr Kant says those eyeing management or leadership positions should attend degree programmes in management, as it is a myth that management and management of human resource is common sense.

MBA programmes and master's courses in fields such as organisational behaviour "help aspiring individuals to hone people management skills and grasp business psychology and human psychology in the workplace context", he adds.

But credentials alone do not ensure career advancement.

Mr Mead says: "While in general, additional qualifications can help your career advance, it is important to ensure you also balance these extra qualifications with the necessary practical experience that employers are looking for if your career is to benefit."

For example, while soft skills — such as team management — are taught in management courses, interviewees should demonstrate these skills through examples from their previous jobs. An employer also values an interviewee's "cultural fit" with its existing team, company values and way of doing business.

He adds: "These kinds of attributes are less about further education and more to do with an individual's character and attitude towards work."

Agreeing, Mr Clement Ong says: "Having an additional qualification sometimes gives you an edge in landing your job or moving up

that corporate ladder, but there is no guarantee. Look beyond qualifications, as attitude, personality, cultural fit and leadership skills can also make or break your chance of getting the job offer or your next promotion."

Consider all factors

Where the targeted qualifications benefit one's career, the cost and reputation of the course should also be considered in calculating the return on investment.

Mr Kant says the reputation of an institute is more important for those who intend to switch employers or employment after completing a programme.

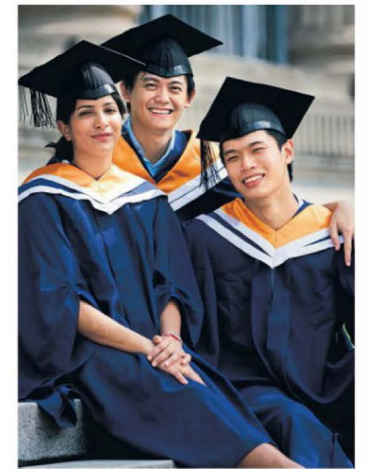
Mr Kant notes that where a qualification is in high demand, "employers will look at the quality of your degree or diploma — they will closely examine the transcripts for the elective subjects and grades in the different courses you may have taken".

Besides financial investment in a course, another factor to weigh is loss of income for full-time students and the demands of juggling work, family and school for part-time students.

He says: "On the other hand, not doing the course may be detrimental to future career prospects and earning capacity. In deciding, consider the fact that it may be wiser to accept a temporary 'slowdown' in your career while you acquire an additional qualification."

Learning as a way to fire up a career need not always require formal programmes.

Mr Clement Ong says: "On-the-job training and learning from others' experiences can also be very effective. With advances in technology, we can also explore many other modes of learning."



Points to ponder

Mr Kamal Kant, who lectures on subjects including Working In The 21st Century and Career Strategies, Planning And Management, offers the following advice:

- It is important to maintain employability with the right mix of qualifications, experience and expertise.
- Be selective about the intended course or qualification. Speak to industry veterans to understand its relevance and value to your career.
- As for most people, a career spans at least 42 years — from the age of 25 to 67 — so strategic career planning maintains employability. One can use periods of forced "inactivity" to gain qualifications that are likely to be relevant in future.
- A career plan and strategy allows one to make an informed choice about the qualification to pursue. An understanding of the industry and its professional demands enables the right course to be chosen at the cost that suits one's budget and time.
- Those eyeing leadership or managerial positions may find degrees that impart soft skills vital.
- Read the prospectus carefully to understand the amount of time and effort needed. For every hour of lecture or contact time, one may need to invest between three and seven hours of study time — depending on the qualification — on assignments and other course-related work.
- Calculate the exact cost of pursuing the course or qualification. Know when fees are payable and do not overlook the cost of books.
- Ensure that assignment deadlines and examination dates do not clash with your work and family commitments.

