

# Shark research, embalming, carpentry

## The unconventional internships pursued by S'porean students



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For four months of her university studies, the Bahamas was home for Ms Inez Alsagoff.

Then 19, the environmental studies undergraduate had applied to be a shark research intern at non-profit organisation Bimini Shark Lab to pursue her passion for marine biology.

"My father used to do competitive kite surfing, so I grew up around the ocean and began to love it," said Ms Alsagoff, who is now 26 and working as a global partnerships coordinator in Singapore at non-profit organisation Coral Gardeners.

"I had previously followed Bimini Shark Lab on social media, so when the position opened up when I was in university, I applied for it," she said.

But going abroad cost a large sum, so she was able to fund her stint in the Bahamas only through grants from the National University of Singapore (NUS).

During her time there, Ms Alsagoff assisted student researchers who were pursuing their further education. Some of her responsibilities included tagging sharks, performing workups on sharks and stingrays, collecting blood and tissue samples as well as studying the distribution of sharks.

Even though she had no prior experience in the field, the people she worked with were nice enough to teach her everything from scratch – including how to steer a boat. She already had diving skills and was a member of the dive club at NUS.

Upon graduating in 2021, she worked for an ocean clean-up organisation and was based in Singapore and Indonesia. Her current employer is working towards coral restoration, and she plans to remain in the space for the foreseeable future.

"My mother was initially concerned whether this industry paid well," said Ms Alsagoff. "But after reassuring her that I can pay my own bills, she was supportive of my decision."

She added that she encourages other young people to chase their passions, even if that may lead them to a different industry from what they studied. "I learnt everything from my experiences; pursuing such internships allows you



Ms Inez Alsagoff, then 19, during her stint as a shark research intern at non-profit organisation Bimini Shark Lab in the Bahamas. Her current employer is working towards coral restoration. PHOTO: COURTESY OF INEZ ALSAGOFF



Mr Yee Chien Ping, 27, founded his woodworking company in 2023. He gained skills in working with metal and wood during a two-month internship, which saw him develop a love for woodworking. PHOTO: COURTESY OF YEE CHIEN PING

to gain a very good footing in the industry," she said.

Amid rising competition to acquire career-driven experience before graduating, some young people in Singapore are eschewing the traditional route to pursue unconventional internships.

In late May, for instance, Singa-

porean undergraduates Charis Chua, 22, and Heng Yi-Hsin, 21, beat thousands of applicants here and won a competition to intern with Formula One team Red Bull Racing. The pair completed a 2½-month stint with the team at their headquarters in Milton Keynes, England.



Ms Ashley Peh, 19, spent two months in 2023 as an embalming intern at Direct Funeral Services. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ASHLEY PEH

### ESSENTIAL SOFT SKILLS

**While these unconventional internships might not provide industry-specific or technical skills directly related to the graduate's field of study, they offer valuable opportunities for developing essential soft skills. These may include emotional intelligence, innovative thinking, adaptability and effective collaboration.**



**MS BETUL GENC**, senior vice-president and head of Asean at recruitment firm Adecco, noting that the impact of unconventional internships can vary based on factors including job requirements, industry standards and the perspective of the hiring manager.

Although students who go off the beaten track may not always learn hard skills that are directly related to their course of study, experts said they can still benefit in other ways, such as through developing soft skills and gaining clarity about their careers.

Mr Gerald Tan, projects director

at career service provider Avodah People Solutions, said internships are integral in helping students discover more about their work preferences and build confidence to make career decisions.

"Having a 'unique' internship can be useful because it is the expression of the student exercising their preferred choice. Exercising one's choice can be very empowering, as it creates ownership and motivation for the student, which will flow into their eventual school-to-work decision," he said.

### WOODWORKING AND EMBALMING

This was the case for Mr Yee Chien Ping, 27, who found himself at a crossroads back when he was a final-year accountancy student in polytechnic. He could not decide whether to continue with a business degree next or switch to the design field, after being inspired by a design elective module he took.

He chose design, but hit a roadblock when he was rejected for the university course he wanted.

"I was given a reality check when they did not offer me a place to study due to inadequate design projects to justify my skills," said Mr Yee, who had applied for early admission to the School of Art, Design and Media (ADM) at Nanyang Technological University in 2017.

Undeterred, he then approached XPC, an experience centre set up by former hardware chain Home-Fix, and secured a two-month design internship, during which he learnt technical skills in working with metal and wood. Through that, he developed a love and passion for woodworking.

With this additional experience, Mr Yee was admitted to ADM the following year.

Throughout his undergraduate years, he took design modules and continued to work on freelance projects making wooden trinkets and furniture for schoolmates and friends.

Having built up his skills and portfolio, Mr Yee was able to secure an apprenticeship with Roger & Sons, a furniture crafting and woodworking firm, in the third year of his studies. His tasks in the operational department included interpreting blueprints and performing quality control checks.

Today, he runs his own woodworking company, Incognito Crafts, which he founded in 2023. His completed projects involve residential and commercial spaces, and his clients include private and government organisations.

His advice to other young people is to not be afraid of failure.

"Failure is the best form of teaching, to let you know whether you are suitable to start something else," he said.

Biomedical science student Ashley Peh overcame a different type of challenge in pursuing her internship in 2023.

While her peers were interning in clinics or hospitals, she chose a different approach to chalking up experience with human bodies – as an embalming intern at Direct Funeral Services.

The 19-year-old Singapore polytechnic student said that friends and family were initially filled with disbelief and disgust.

"With some Chinese superstitions making death a taboo, people told me I would be haunted or lured to death," she said, adding that people around her thought it would bring bad luck.

"However, my parents were sup-

portive and have moulded me (from a young age) to not shun away from the notions of death and to not believe the negative connotations associated with it," she said. She noted that this helped her to be in a better headspace during the internship.

She added that seeing the bodies of babies or other young people brought to the embalming studio highlighted how easily life can be taken away, and made her appreciate the time she has now.

"While this experience gave me a different and wider perspective of death, almost making it seem less mystical and more part of normal life, it also highlighted the fragility of life," she said.

But she still experienced emotional and mental fatigue at times when she was unable to disconnect from work, which caused her to imagine things. She overcame this by sharing with her parents about her day in order to let out her emotions.

It was her parents who encouraged her to take up the internship opportunity.

"They said that death is something I would have to face daily in the healthcare industry so I should learn how to handle it," said Ms Peh, who has always dreamed of being in the field of medicine and healthcare and is fascinated by human anatomy.

Another reason she chose this route over a more conventional internship in a clinic or shadowing a doctor was to push the boundaries of her learning.

During her two-month stint, she observed how embalmers carried out their tasks and facilitated communication between the delivery team and the embalmers.

"I was also able to observe many medical situations, such as patients with pacemakers or amputations," she said.

### REINFORCING SOFT SKILLS

Ms Betul Genc, senior vice-president and head of Asean at recruitment firm Adecco, noted that when it comes to applying for jobs, the impact of such internships can vary based on factors including job requirements, industry standards and the perspective of the hiring manager.

"While these unconventional internships might not provide industry-specific or technical skills directly related to the graduate's field of study, they offer valuable opportunities for developing essential soft skills. These may include emotional intelligence, innovative thinking, adaptability and effective collaboration," she said.

Avodah People Solutions' Mr Tan said unconventional internships could set job applicants back if they are not able to explain their choice of internship, and how it supports their choice of formal work. It could also be a sticking point if details of the internship – such as work tasks and responsibilities – are not elaborated on clearly to fit what the recruiter is looking for.

On the plus side, however, such internships can make a resume more memorable to recruiters, said Mr Tan.

"It could also give the student more talking points to signal motivation and ownership, which could be appealing to employers who are looking for fresh graduates who are determined, creative and solution-oriented."

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