

Overseas internships may open doors, but they are no golden ticket in tough graduate job market

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AS UNDERGRADUATES in Singapore navigate one of the toughest graduate job markets in recent years, some are looking beyond local internships to strengthen their resumes.

But employers told *The Business Times* that the “overseas” label alone is unlikely to move the needle.

While international work experience can demonstrate adaptability and initiative, they place greater weight on how well those experiences translate to the role in terms of skills, they added.

“Employers in Singapore are increasingly focused on whether candidates can deliver value and contribute from Day One,” said Linda Teo, country manager of ManpowerGroup Singapore.

She added that while overseas internships can be a positive signal in some cases, they are “not a primary factor employers use to differentiate candidates”.

According to Teo, 50 per cent of employers report a willingness to pay a premium for skills gained through overseas experience such

as strengthened cultural awareness and inclusion.

For students, the appeal of overseas internships lies partly in their ability to make a resume more memorable and potentially secure an interview opportunity.

Final-year National University of Singapore (NUS) student, Wang Yuqing, who completed a year-long internship as a data analyst at New York-based startup Kickoff, said the experience made her “a more interesting candidate”, but did not provide a guaranteed advantage.

“The overseas setting helped shape my personal development and gave me a unique story to share,” she added.

“But the value of the experience came mainly from what I accomplished and learnt during the internship.”

Useful lessons

Teo, a final-year undergraduate who asked to be identified by her surname, completed a six-month business development internship at a startup in Chongqing.

She said the experience helped her stand out, especially among Singapore-based employers looking to tap into the China market.

“Having that knowledge of the market really helps a lot, especially when it comes to the Chinese market nowadays,” said the student. “That actually helped me secure more interview opportunities.”

Beyond the technical work, Teo said the stint gave her first-hand knowledge of China’s business landscape, consumer behaviour and workplace culture – lessons that became useful talking points in interviews.

Meanwhile, Joanne Hu, a final-year NUS Business School student, said her year-long internship in New York broadened her view of possible career paths and later inspired her to co-found Majulah Abroad, a platform connecting youths with global career opportunities.

Hu wanted to help others explore overseas opportunities and meet like-minded peers, after seeing

the value of her own internship experience abroad.

OCBC has noticed an increase in young talent with overseas internship experience, pointed out Ernest Phang, the bank’s head of talent acquisition, total rewards, risk and compliance in group human resources.

Seeking out such opportunities could signal that a candidate is able to learn independently, adapt quickly to new environments and show initiative, he said.

“If a candidate shows that this experience is relevant to the job at hand, their candidacy will be strengthened – regardless of whether the internship was local or overseas,” Phang noted.

Meanwhile, a DBS spokesperson said the bank takes a “holistic approach” to assessing candidates, considering academic background, internship and work experience – local or overseas – alongside qualities such as curiosity, adaptability and learning agility.

“Rather than where an internship was completed, we are more interested in what candidates learnt from the experience, how they challenged themselves and how they can apply those insights

to create impact,” the spokesperson said.

At JPMorgan Chase, both overseas and local internships can help candidates stand out, said Justin Loi, Asia-Pacific head of early careers. He added that the bank has not observed differences attributable solely to overseas versus local internships.

“What sets candidates apart is the substance of their work and how well these align with the role.”

Local universities that BT spoke to said that interest in overseas internships is growing, as students seek global exposure and ways to differentiate themselves.

An NUS spokesperson said that established markets such as North America, Western Europe and parts of the Asia-Pacific continue to attract strong student interest.

At the same time, the university is also seeing increasing demand for opportunities in emerging economies, particularly China and Asean.

“This reflects growing awareness by our students of the rapid technological advancements, economic growth and expansive career prospects in these regions,” the spokesperson added.

Sarah Neo, head of career development at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), said the university has observed rising interest in overseas internships in recent years.

The top destinations among SUSS students are China, Laos and Thailand.

The Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) has also recorded a “significant increase” in overseas placements in the latest academic year, with China and India attracting growing interest given their fast-growing markets and dynamic work environments.

“There has been a growing trend of students seeking wider exposure through internships beyond Singapore as students today are more aware of global opportunities available to them,” said Angelvin Parma, head of the career development centre at SUTD.

Relevance still matters most

More than 250 Singapore Management University (SMU) students completed overseas internships in 2025, with Asia remaining the primary focus.

Prasanthi Guda, director for career and employability services at SMU’s Dato’ Kho Hui Meng Career Centre, said such internships provide “immersive, real-world experiences” that prepare graduates for a global workforce.

ManpowerGroup’s Teo noted that overseas internships may be useful for roles involving cross-border collaboration, regional exposure or diverse stakeholders.

But the location of the stint is not the deciding factor.

“Employers are primarily assessing whether candidates can contribute meaningfully, rather than where the experience was gained.”

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