

Graduates can remain confident that S'pore is still creating jobs: Minister

Ong Ye Kung also urges firms to cool 'arms race' over grades, internships when hiring

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Graduates can remain confident that Singapore is still competitive and creating jobs, Coordinating Minister for Social Policies Ong Ye Kung said on Sept 7.

Addressing an audience of about 250 students, he also acknowledged a tighter graduate job market and greater job-search anxiety. He said: "You are not entering a declining or stagnant economy. You are entering one that is growing, that's attracting investments, and that's still dynamic."

"So you are not cooked. You're still raw."

Ong, who is also Health Minister, was speaking at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum at the NUS University Cultural Centre, where he laid out his assessment of the changes to the job market and advised students on how to maximise their chances of succeeding in their careers.

He also called on employers to cool an "arms race" over grades and internships, and prevent hiring from becoming an ever-escalating competition.

Pointing out that the way they hire ultimately shapes the arms race's intensity, he said: "We are not asking employers to lower their hiring standards."

"But every additional signal that employers send – hiring candidates with more internships, more credentials, better grades – becomes something that students feel you must chase to curate the perfect CV."

Ong urged employers to look beyond GPAs and internships when assessing fresh graduates whose experiences may not fit neatly into a conventional CV, but who can demonstrate their resilience, initiative, discipline, empathy, character and work ethic.

Hiring a fresh graduate is "always about spotting potential and tak-



Coordinating Minister for Social Policies Ong Ye Kung speaking at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum, moderated by Kathleen Chan, on Sept 7. He laid out his assessment of the changes to the job market, and advised students on how to maximise their chances of succeeding in their careers. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

ing a chance in a young person", he said. "Help assure applicants that this is how you hire, and cool down an arms race that is energy-sapping and, I think, making the undergraduate experience less holistic for young people at a critical formative age."

Ong's remarks come as the proportion of graduates who secured employment six months after graduation declined from 92.9 per cent in 2023 to 88.9 per cent in 2025, according to Graduate Employment Survey data.

He attributed the tighter graduate job market to three factors: more graduates entering the market, employers needing to differentiate between applicants, and higher expectations of new hires.

Pointing out that about one in two students in a cohort today is a university graduate, compared with about one in five when he graduated in the early 1990s, the minister said that with more grad-

DYNAMIC AND GROWING ECONOMY

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COORDINATING MINISTER FOR SOCIAL POLICIES ONG YE KUNG, addressing students at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum held at the NUS University Cultural Centre.

uates, a degree remains valuable but distinguishes candidates less than before.

Employers have therefore also been selecting applicants through internships, alongside academic results. This has created a "self-reinforcing loop" in which employers tighten their hiring criteria, graduates do more to meet those criteria,

and employers then need to further differentiate between applicants, he said.

'BROKEN' CAREER LADDER AFFECTING SOME NEW HIRES

Artificial intelligence is another change affecting the job market. Ong said some organisations and

industries are using AI to automate routine tasks that used to be handled by new hires, potentially raising the baseline expectations of them.

He described this as the "broken ladder syndrome", where the career ladder remains, but the first few rungs are missing and a new hire has to take a bigger step to start off at the third rung.

However, AI is not resulting in mass job displacement, said Ong. In most cases, he said, AI is replacing certain tasks rather than entire jobs, and it is being used instead as a tool that could result in job redesign.

While it is natural for people to feel uncertain about a technology that is growing exponentially, AI could also compress the time taken for inventions and discoveries, potentially creating new economic activity and opportunities, said Ong. Governments could also put in

place guard rails, including reserving certain jobs for humans, while consumers may continue to demand a human touch in areas such as healthcare, education and services, he added.

"We want food prepared by human chefs. We want to watch live bands. We want songs written by the real Taylor Swift," he said. "We want to watch films featuring human actors and real-world imagery like *Top Gun: Maverick* – that one has no AI at all."

Ong said graduates can remain confident about their prospects, pointing to Singapore's continued economic growth, investments and job creation.

Investments by firms like Micron, Roche, GSK, Sanofi and Google, as well as the expansion of financial institutions and both integrated resorts, are signs that companies continue to base important functions in Singapore, he added.

Major local companies including DBS Bank, Keppel, Sembcorp and ST Engineering are also expanding their businesses and hiring new graduates, he said.

But he said graduates should not rely solely on the strength of the economy to navigate a tougher job market. Instead, they should focus on building mastery in an area they care about. "A degree may open the door, but mastery of your craft will define you as a professional and become your biggest competitive edge," he said.

In a world where AI takes over routine tasks and people are surrounded by AI-generated content, mastery is what sets people apart and will be more valuable than before, he added.

Ong then urged graduates to demonstrate their interest, passion and desire to pursue mastery when applying for jobs, rather than simply casting a wide net.

"There is a saying that you miss 100 per cent of the shots you do not take, so it is better to send out more CVs to increase your chances of hitting something," he said. "There's a certain logic I can understand, but remember this: employers are moving targets; they're not static targets, and they can move faster than your shots."

He added that employers can tell when a CV is mass-produced, even when it contains customised tweaks, and urged graduates to instead zero in on the industry, type of work and organisation that suits and interests them.

He also encouraged graduates to seriously consider accepting offers when they come along.

Learning and laying a career foundation matter most at the start of a career, he said.

"Your first job is a starting point, not a settling point."

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