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SMEs call for longer internships for poly students

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BY NG JING YNG - MARCH 17

SINGAPORE — As the Government aims to deepen industry involvement in the vocational education landscape, employers are calling for longer internships so that polytechnic students can truly learn the ins and outs of the business.

Six of the 10 local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) TODAY interviewed felt that the current internship period of between six weeks and five months is too short for students to be involved in meaningful tasks or be sufficiently aware of industry demands.

Other challenges companies cited included having to further stretch their employees who, in addition to juggling various workloads, would then have to mentor the interns and oversee their work.

Then there is the disincentive of interns leaving for multinational companies after they have been trained, the SMEs said.

The Education Ministry is reviewing the Institute of Technical Education and polytechnic system through a 98-member committee led by Senior Minister of State for Education Indranee Rajah. The committee recently visited Switzerland and Germany to study their integrated work-study system and has suggested that industry players play a greater role.

To encourage more SMEs to invest in the internship process, Oneberry Technologies Chief Executive Ken Pereira suggested that interns work for a longer period, which is similar to the German model in which students work for up to a year.

More industry exposure could keep students updated with rapid technology changes, he

said, while Ms Joanne Yeo, Executive Director of Presidium Instruments, suggested that a longer internship could count towards academic credits.

CKE Manufacturing Enterprise Development Manager Kwan Li Feng suggested that polytechnics could include multiple internships throughout the course so students can continuously apply theory to practice. On its part, to motivate interns and to compensate for the short internship length, the firm has divided its engineering projects into various segments to give interns sufficient exposure and to allow the company to assess their abilities.

Among employers interviewed, clean energy firm Alpha Biofuels, for instance, noted that training interns in the auditing process can take up to three months. "Once they pick up the skills, it's time to go," said its Chief Executive Allan Lim.

Food and Beverage firm JUMBO Group's Senior Director (HR and Corporate Affairs) Christina Kong concurred. "In-depth learning is hard because their stints are too short. We also cannot give them a lot of responsibilities," she said.

Given the nature of many skilled industries that work on projects spanning over a few months, employers also prefer interns who can see the project through.

Marcella Holdings co-founder Lai Chang Wen noted that interns who help design fashion items during their 10-week internship do not get to see the process through to the launch. "It is a pity for them", he said.

Another common issue raised by at least three employers is the lack of a structured interview process before students are placed in a firm. In some instances, they are just offered to the company by the polytechnic.

Stressing the importance of the interview, employers pointed out that the internship is a potential recruitment platform, with an average of between one and two interns recruited as full-time staff each year.

The quality and attitude of interns vary and an interview could provide a better assessment, said Techsailor Group's Chief Business Development Officer Leon Leong.

A Lock And Store representative also felt that a prior screening gives employers the opportunity to match a student's aspirations with the appropriate job scope.

Citing limited resources in smaller firms, Mr Benedict Leow, Executive Director of The Soup Spoon, suggested that polytechnics could provide orientation programmes so interns could transit more quickly into the work environment.

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