Gain an edge with international work experience

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Thanks to the work of the ASPIRE (Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review) committee, there are important discussions occurring in Singapore around workplace skills, how to acquire them and the need to update them over a lifetime.

To remain a globally competitive economy, producing the kinds of skills that employees and industries will need may require us to rethink the way people are trained. ASPIRE envisions a much tighter coupling between work and education than currently exists.

Internships are likely to become more the rule than the exception, easing and to some extent erasing the transition from school to work. Students will get more hands-on, practical experience that will give them usable skills that will be rewarded in the marketplace.

Policymakers point to northern Europe, particularly Germany, with its traditional apprenticeship system, where school and work go hand in hand, as a model that helps overcome a worrisome imbalance between the needs of the labour force and the supply of skills in the population.

Such an imbalance is one of the factors pushing up youth and graduate unemployment in a number of countries in southern Europe as well as neighbouring Asian countries, an alarming situation that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted in his National Day Rally speech this year.

As we consider the necessary skills and conditions for employability in the globalised world of the 21st century, there may be another lesson we can learn from Europe. International experience gained through work and study confers skills that are rewarded in the labour market.

WHY EMPLOYERS FAVOUR THOSE WITH OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE

When thinking about implementing ASPIRE’s recommendations to develop more work placements for students, Europe’s experience suggests that it is important to provide opportunities abroad, not only domestically.

Recently, the European Union released a report on the impact of the Erasmus Programme, the student mobility scheme started in 1987 that allows higher education students from EU member countries to study and train abroad elsewhere in Europe. It looked at the impact on employability of having experience in other countries and surveyed more than 50,000 current students and with and without external work or study, almost 20,000 alumni and hundreds of employers and academic administrators.

The results are illuminating. Employers seek certain traits in new hires that include curiosity, confidence, decisiveness, problem-solving skills, adaptability, tolerance and self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses.

Researchers looked at the distribution of these traits in students over time comparing those who participated in the programme and those who did not. While students who enrolled in the Erasmus programme were more likely to possess these skills prior to their travel, they nevertheless increased their scores on these traits substantially as a result of their time away. As a result, their edge over their stay-at-home peers widened considerably.

This translates into greater employability. Today, two-thirds of European employers see a substantial international experience as an important hiring criteria, up from fewer than 40 per cent who felt that way in 1996.

Even after five years, students who went abroad for work or school had an unemployment rate that is a quarter lower than the non-travellers and they are half as likely to experience long-term bouts of unemployment.

It is not surprising that employers look for these kinds of traits—problem-solving skills and curiosity, for example, are hallmarks of the critical thinking needed for the higher value-added jobs that mature economies seek to generate.

As new job families emerge and become necessary, adaptability of the workforce is key — how many people heard of cloud service specialists five years ago? And in the multicultural, multinational workplaces of today, employees who are intolerant of difference are a liability.

Students with these traits also generate other kinds of gains to the economy. In the Erasmus study, 10 percent of the returned students showed an entrepreneurial flair and started their own businesses.

Even when employers express a preference for these kinds of experiences among those they hire, it will probably be up to the education system to provide the opportunity to acquire them. Economists have long noted the paradox that employers often underinvest in training despite the returns to it because they worry that workers will leave with “portable”, rather than company-specific, skills and work for competitors.

How can programmes be developed to offer students foreign work/study options? Creating an institutional culture or expectation is one way. For example, many of the degree programmes at the Singapore Institute of Technology, the country’s newest public autonomous university, require an overseas experience. Culinary students can learn farm-to-table restaurant logistics and food sourcing in agricultural haven, Napa Valley, while early childhood educators might see first-hand how inclusive classrooms work in Boston.

Administrators at tertiary institutions can work with Singaporean or global firms based here with operations abroad to place interns in positions outside the country. Alumni who are working abroad can be another rich source to tap to help place students.

It is not that such international forays can only impart valuable industry-specific skills, but we also need to recognise their even greater role in developing the habits of mind and personal traits that can keep global economies competitive and individuals employed to their fullest potential.

That is something we can all aspire to.

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What Singapore can learn from Europe

Students at Swiss vocational training institute Ausbildungszen- trum. Singapore policymakers point to northern Europe with its traditional apprenticeship system, where school and work go hand in hand, as a model that helps overcome a worrisome imbalance between the needs of the labour force and the supply of skills in the population. (TOCKTOLL PHOTO)

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