

# Prospects improve for private-school graduates 5 years on

Despite initial bias, SIM's Class of 2013 finds employment rates and salaries do increase

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In recent years, graduate employment surveys of students who take the private-school route have shown that upon graduation, they earn far less than their peers from autonomous universities and seem to find it harder to find full-time jobs. This has raised the question of whether private-school students have been wasting their time and money.

However, a study launched last year by the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM) to track the job prospects of their alumni, five years after they graduate, paints a different picture.

Almost all of them find jobs. They also appear to earn decent salaries.

But, to get there, they have to overcome an inherent bias against private-school students, observers say, a bias that shows itself almost from the time they enter the job market.

The last graduate employment survey released by the Committee for Private Education and SkillsFuture Singapore in November 2017 showed that only six in 10 private-school graduates found full-time jobs within six months of completing their studies, drawing an average starting monthly pay of \$2,550.

This was lower than statistics from the autonomous universities (AUs), where 80 per cent of graduates found full-time jobs within six months of getting their degrees, with an average monthly starting pay of \$3,325.

Most recruitment experts attribute the differences to employers discriminating against private-school graduates. But what happens five years down the career path?

To answer this question, SIM, Sin-

gapore's leading private school, studied last year what had become of its class of 2013.

SIM is seen as the go-to school by Singaporeans who fail to get into local universities or their choice of degree programme. Out of 18,000 enrolled in its degree programmes, 14,800 are Singaporeans. The majority – 12,800 – are studying full time. The results show that SIM alumni's job prospects and pay improve considerably over five years.

Of the 1,133 SIM graduates who responded to the survey, the overall employment rate was 97.4 per cent, and 94 per cent held full-time jobs.

The vast majority are working for private firms, with about one in 10 working for the public sector.

Their gross monthly salary works out to \$4,551. Other findings from the SIM survey include:

- One in four holds a manager or senior manager position, and 61 per cent reported that they are senior executives or executives.
- Three in five have been promoted at least once.
- Of those surveyed, 66 per cent said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their career so far.
- One in 10 reported that they were self-employed, and among them, 40 per cent said they were employers.
- Majority are in private firms, both local and foreign, with more than half working in companies with more than 500 employees.

Mr Lee Kwok Cheong, chief executive of SIM Holdings, which runs degree programmes with 12 university partners, attributes the initial lag in job rates and salaries to employers' bias against those who take the private-school route.

"Most employers still hire based on qualifications. They equate gen-



Mr Andrew Yeo was valedictorian at the Singapore Institute of Management. He then earned a master's degree in social policy and planning from the London School of Economics and Political Science, but still did not get a response for many of the government jobs he applied for. He eventually got a job as a research assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies. He then moved to a consultancy firm and subsequently, the Singapore Exchange Regulation. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

eral academic ability to skills. And our students are seen to be not as good as those from the public universities because many come via the polytechnic route and did not make the cut for university."

He said he was heartened by the results showing much improved jobs and salaries for SIM graduates.

"It shows that our students go on to prove themselves in their jobs."

He said that after a few years, most bosses do not even remember which university an employee went to, that it is performance that counts.

"The results are encouraging. Our graduates might start at a lower pay, but those who do well catch up and some go on to do better than public university graduates."

National University of Singapore economist Kelvin Seah echoed Mr Lee's reasoning, adding that a graduate's alma mater matters as employers often use this as a rough gauge of a person's ability.

Said Dr Seah: "However, once on the job, the university name may not matter so much any more. What matters is whether the person is productive and can value-add to the company. So, I would expect earnings and promotion prospects between private and AU grads to narrow with working experience."

He added that the more important question to address is the earnings gap, as starting salaries can have a persistent impact on lifetime earnings.

He said this can be determined only through longitudinal data providing information on the universi-

## JOB PERFORMANCE COUNTS

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE  
ECONOMIST KELVIN SEAH

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ties people attend and the salaries they earn, at various points in time.

However, Dr Seah said the high full-time employment rate of 94 per cent and the relatively high gross salary of \$4,551 of SIM alumni are commendable, given that the median gross monthly income from work (excluding employer Central Provident Fund contributions) of the population of full-time workers in Singapore was \$3,800 last year.

Recruitment experts, including Mr David Leong, managing director of PeopleWorldwide Consulting, hold the same view.

Several SIM alumni interviewed admitted that they faced discrimination during their job search.

Several of them, despite having good grades and even postgraduate qualifications from prestigious universities overseas after SIM, said they were not even given a chance to attend interviews for government jobs.

However, they were driven to prove themselves against their peers from the AUs and worked hard at doing well in their careers.

Mr Andrew Yeo, 31, senior associate at the strategic planning office of Singapore Exchange Regulation, the regulatory entity of SGX, said that despite going to the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and graduating with a master's in social policy and planning, he could not land a job with any government body.

In the end, he decided to try for a job in academia and found work as a

research assistant with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). After two years, he moved to work in a consultancy firm and subsequently, SGX.

He said he went to SIM as his polytechnic results were not good enough to get him into university.

But despite completing his University at Buffalo degree at SIM with top marks and being named valedictorian, he realised he was not going to land a job in the government sector.

"That was one of the reasons why I went to LSE, to get a degree that would put me in better stead. Private-school students tend to over-compensate. I have classmates who went to universities such as Oxford and Cambridge."

He was disappointed when he did not receive a response for many of the government jobs he applied for after LSE.

"I had a lucky break, in that the persons who interviewed me for the IPS job took the time to interview me and, in the end, were convinced that despite my non-conventional route, I had the right skills for the job."

Mr Lee said SIM has to accept the fact that there is a bias against its graduates.

"That's why we are focused on our mission – to provide a good education and training pathways which will open doors in life for our students. So, despite the different starting point, we focus on helping them perform well at work, so that they will be able to move up."

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