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'We offer only local scholarships'

Some firms believe local degree as good as one from top overseas school. -ST

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THOSE applying for university scholarships from companies such as SingTel, the Keppel Group, Sembcorp Industries and Alexandra Hospital can perish the thought of jetting overseas.

These four are among top companies that hand out scholarships tenable only in local universities as they believe them to be as good as the Oxbridge, Ivy League or other brand-name institutions overseas.

Sembcorp, for example, said that the universities here were 'just as good', but because it had strong international operations, it encourages its scholars to get overseas exposure through exchange programmes and sets up work-study stints at its overseas offices.

Major accountancy firm KPMG Singapore, for instance, has offered only local scholarships for over 20 years and has filled its top ranks with local graduates.

Mr Philip Lee, who heads the firm's people, performance and culture, said: 'Securing a place in a local university has always been competitive, and only the best academic performers succeed in getting placements in their choice of discipline. This is especially true of our business and accountancy schools.'

But the majority of companies still dangle offers of overseas scholarships in front of the brightest students.

And there is no denying the country's top brains are choosing foreign over local universities, as former minister and Temasek Holdings chairman S. Dhanabalan noted recently.

Even the recipients of Singapore's most prestigious scholarship - the President's Scholarship - typically go abroad. In the past five years, only two of 24 recipients chose to study at home. Both are now at the National University of Singapore studying medicine.

Mr Dhanabalan has suggested re-looking how scholarships are given out to ensure a fair distribution.

That said, the number of scholars who take the local route has risen slightly. This year, 10 of the 84 students awarded scholarships by the Public Service Commission chose to study at home, making it one in eight students. In 2004, the ratio was lower - one in 11.

Singapore Press Holdings said most of its applicants still aspire to an overseas scholarship. More than half of its 71 scholarship holders of the past five years are studying in the United States and Britain.

A four-year course abroad can cost a company \$400,000 per student - three to six times more than a local education. For the companies, it is a race to bag top talent.

An SPH spokesman said: 'Many candidates get multiple scholarship offers. We might lose these candidates if we offer them local scholarships.'

But there are companies which believe firmly that their scholarships for local universities are enough to woo the best.

KPMG's Mr Lee said the quality of the candidates is rising every year, indicative of the local schools' stiff standards.

Companies which offer local scholarships say having the recipients close at hand is good. NatSteel Holdings, for example, invites its scholars to company events to get to know them and to introduce them to the company's culture.

And human resource consultants said overseas graduates are not necessarily favoured over local ones. Career consultant Josh Goh of GMP Recruitment Services said the local schools' high standards have made them a brand name among employers, but added that how the individual performs in the interview is also important towards clinching the job.

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