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Employers welcome new Earn and Learn scheme



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BY NG JING YNG - FEBRUARY 25

SINGAPORE — A new programme for fresh polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates to go on paid apprenticeships and earn industry-recognised qualifications has been welcomed by employers, who felt it could help secure a talent pipeline for their sectors.

But for the SkillsFuture Earn and Learn programme to work, there must be a rigorous

selection process so companies can identify good candidates, and guidance from the Government on how to structure such initiatives to benefit all parties, employers said.

They also cited challenges such as limited manpower at smaller companies to provide proper mentorship, and acknowledged that trainees continuing their paper chase for higher qualifications could be a challenge.

The Earn and Learn programme was announced by Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in his Budget statement on Monday, as part of the SkillsFuture plan to drive lifelong learning. It will see graduates matched with suitable employers and undergo training and mentorship, while studying for industry-recognised qualifications.

Employers told TODAY that trainees should be in the firm for at least a year to acquire the needed skills. Home-Fix DIY managing director Low Cheong Kee suggested one-and-a-half years, so trainees can have broad exposure from serving customers in the store to human resources, to appreciate the workings of the retail industry.

The current internship length for students — anything between six weeks and five months — is too short, said employers, and full-time staff are not motivated to mentor them. Bliss Restaurant and Catering owner Christine Loh said: “After training them (interns) in one area for weeks, they will have to leave.”

CKE Manufacturing enterprise development manager Kwan Li Feng called for common training guidelines, to introduce a degree of consistency among companies.

Playware Studios Asia chief creative director Siddharth Jain said the gaming industry might not have a good reputation as a fair internship employer. “In the long run, having some sort of training structure will help everyone to work towards the same end,” he added. Noting that trainees who do not perform could affect business projects, he called for a robust selection process that allows employers to screen trainees.

Mr Tharman had said on Monday that trainees and employers would receive “substantial support” from the Government. Mr Low said the subsidies could be used to send trainers for accreditation. “The subsidies can also go towards helping us to create self-learning tools such as online learning programmes,” he added.

Students interviewed recounted internship experiences that varied in quality and felt there should be more oversight on firms involved in the Earn and Learn programme. They also said that pursuing higher education would still be their ultimate goal.

Ms Loh noted that young workers are always keen to advance, if not for higher qualifications, then for larger, brand-name companies. Adding that she would not mind the graduates leaving her firm after they are trained, she said: “We see it as our social

mission to train the staff and we want them to do well, and there are many who eventually move on to better things and pay their way through higher education as they work with us.”

She added: “Of course, with the financial subsidies (from the government), it will help to defray training costs and allow us to provide more perks to retain them or pay them at a more competitive rate.”

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