

# How do I pick the right private school for a degree that helps me get a job?

It is the time of the year when university applicants who failed to land a place in local universities are considering the private school route. Senior Education Correspondent Sandra Davie answers their questions on picking the right school that delivers in terms of finding jobs.

**Q** My polytechnic graduate son did not get a place in the local universities, but he is keen on studying for a business degree. So, he has started applying for a place in a private school. But we are worried after reading the news that less than half of fresh graduates from private institutions found full-time jobs in 2024. My husband and I do not have the means to send him abroad for studies. Can you give us some advice?

**A** First, I hope your son has also considered other options, such as work-study programmes that lead to specialist diplomas and perhaps even going out to work for a year or two to get some work experience before trying again for university.

Having work experience, especially in a related field, may give him the edge when applying for a place in the autonomous universities (AUs).

But if he has set his mind on obtaining a degree through a private education institution (PEI), then it is important to consider job outcomes. The latest Private Education Institution Graduate Employment Survey released by SkillsFuture Singapore has indeed raised some concerns.

Among the 2,300 fresh PEI graduates surveyed in the labour force – those who are working, or not working but actively looking and available for jobs – 74.8 per cent reported they had found permanent, freelance or part-time jobs within



It is essential for students to involve themselves in sports and activities that help to nurture soft skills such as adaptability and innovative thinking. The bigger private education institutions, such as the Singapore Institute of Management (above) and Kaplan, stand out in offering facilities for co-curricular activities. PHOTO: SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT

six months of graduating. This is a notable drop from 83.2 per cent in 2023.

What is also concerning is that

only 46.4 per cent of them found full-time permanent jobs within six months of graduation – a significant decline from 58.7 per cent in 2023.

At the same time, more PEI graduates turned to part-time or temporary roles – 24.2 per cent, up from 18.9 per cent in 2023 – while those engaging in freelance work saw a slight drop – 4.2 per cent, down from 5.7 per cent.

The findings underscore a growing employment gap between graduates of private institutions and those from publicly funded AUs, such as Singapore Management University, Nanyang Technological University and National University of Singapore.

About 79.5 per cent of AU graduates secured full-time permanent roles within six months of graduation, with 6 per cent doing part-time or temporary work, and 1.6 per cent working freelance, according to the joint employment survey for the 2024 cohort of these graduates.

Fresh AU graduates started with a median monthly salary of \$4,500.

In contrast, PEI graduates in full-time roles earned a median monthly salary of \$3,500, a modest increase from \$3,400 in 2023. Those from the Parkway College of Nursing and Allied Health and ERC Institute, which offers degree courses in business and technology, among other things, took home the highest pay at \$4,000, followed by graduates from the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM) who earned \$3,600.

So what accounts for the gap in employment rates and salaries?

To understand the difference in salaries between the graduates of AUs and those from private schools, you should consider the fact that PEI graduates may hold degrees in different disciplines, and many PEIs do not offer degrees in fields such as medicine or law, where graduates earn higher salaries.

Also, the reality is that employers do discriminate against PEI graduates, just as they discriminate against graduates who come from less reputable universities.

However, take heart – once a graduate is in a job, it is the performance that matters.

In 2019, SIM released a survey in which it tracked the career progression of its class of 2013. It found that five years on, their employment rate and salaries had improved considerably.

Also, the big PEIs with thousands of students, such as Kaplan and SIM, have over the years launched numerous programmes to boost the job prospects of their students and provided career counselling, career talks and visits

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to companies.

Kaplan's students benefit from industry experts through initiatives such as workshops and coaching sessions. It also offers networking opportunities, career fairs, recruitment talks and a job-matching service.

Kaplan is advised by industry advisory boards on the latest trends and receives input to ensure its course curricula remain relevant and current so that it can prepare its students for the real world.

SIM has a dedicated in-house learner advisory and career centre which offers comprehensive career guidance and support for its students and alumni. This includes Project Protege, a four-month mentorship programme that connects students with alumni and industry mentors, for guided learning and career exploration.

SIM also holds career and internship fairs twice a year. Its most recent career fair held in February saw close to 60 participating companies across sectors such as accounting, business, finance, healthcare, public service and social services.

The school has also recently launched the CareerSense app, an AI-powered all-in-one career navigator, designed to guide learners and alumni towards meaningful careers.

**Q** I am an A-level holder looking to take the private school route as I failed to get into the local universities. How do I choose the right school and degree course, and ensure that the curriculum is rigorous? Also, I am interested in emerging areas, such as artificial intelligence (AI). Do private schools offer courses in these areas?

**A** Every year, students and parents ask about the quality of education that private institutions provide. It is a legitimate concern as the private education sector in Singapore is of uneven quality.

It is good to look at the more established institutions.

The bigger PEIs such as SIM, Kaplan and PSB Academy also offer more degree programmes, including degrees in new as well as in-demand areas such as AI, cyber security, finance and allied health. SIM currently has 16,000 part-

time and full-time students, the majority of whom are Singaporeans. It works with 12 university partners from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and the US. Together they offer over 140 academic programmes ranging from diplomas to undergraduate degrees to postgraduate degrees.

In emerging fields, SIM runs computer science degree programmes with the University of London, with specialisations in machine learning and AI, the internet of things and virtual reality.

Kaplan Singapore has about 20,000 full-time and part-time students, almost 65 per cent of whom are Singaporeans and permanent residents. The courses it offers with its nine university partners include degrees with double majors from Murdoch University combining psychology and marketing; banking and criminology; and finance and politics.

Once you have decided on a PEI, you should check if it offers the specific course and specialisation you are interested in, such as business studies with a specialisation in AI or finance.

It is also good to check on the partner university that is offering the degree. Most of the PEIs here, especially the bigger ones, have a range of partners from Britain, Australia and the US.

Research the reputation of the university by referring to the international rankings by QS, Times Higher Education, Symonds and Times Higher Education. This will give a general idea of the standing of the universities.

There are many "in-country rankings" as well, such as the US News and World ranking for institutions in the country.

The different disciplines are also considered in international rankings. These can be a lot more useful in choosing universities. While some universities may not do well in overall rankings, they may be ranked higher in a specific discipline, be it business or engineering.

It is also important to check how involved the partner universities are in running the academic programmes provided by the PEI in Singapore.

Murdoch University from Western Australia, one of Kaplan's partner universities, has a pro vice-chancellor in charge of transnational education based in Singapore to oversee the academic aspects of the programmes.

Check on the lecturers teaching the courses here. Some universities have their academic staff from the home campus fly here to teach the courses. Others use academics from the home campus to supplement them with lecturers based here.

All the institutions hold open houses and encourage campus tours. Open houses will be held in June and July, including on June 14 for SIM-University of Buffalo. You should attend them to have a first-hand look. Many of the partner universities will have their lecturers and deans there, and the opportunity to speak to them about the courses you are interested in.

While attending the open houses, check out the facilities provided by the PEIs to ensure they provide more than just classrooms.

In this age of AI, employers are also looking at soft skills, such as adaptability, innovative thinking and public speaking. It is essential for students to involve themselves in sports and activities that help to nurture these soft skills.

Again, the bigger PEIs stand out in offering facilities for co-curricular activities.

Kaplan, which opened a new campus in North Bridge Road in January, has a total of 14 clubs catering to students keen on a variety of sports and other activities, including community service, music and dance.

SIM stands out from the other PEIs because of its sprawling campus along Clementi Road. It has nearly 80 student clubs covering the arts, sports, hip-hop dance, community service and social entrepreneurship.

SIM is also the only PEI with sports teams competing at the national level under the Singapore University Sports Council.

SIM business graduate Kevin Ong, 33, who has risen to a mid-level managerial position in a business advisory firm after six years of working, said he was surprised at the fringe of facilities on the school campus, which got him participating in a range of sports.

"I was surprised as I did not expect a private school to place so much importance on student activities and to provide the facilities and resources."

"The sports and activities there helped me build more people skills and become a more outgoing person. That has helped put me in good stead in terms of advancement in my career in business development."

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