Internships off the beaten track

Singapore undergrads are heading for places such as Africa and Central America

BY LIM ZHENGWEI

WHILE their peers took summer internships positions in comfortable offices in Raffles Place this June, Mr Benjamin Ruck and Mr Oh Hui Jin of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) chose to head to Ghana—eventhough they did not know much about the country.

During their 10-week stint with agribusiness firm Winarint International, they did everything from learning to live in an unfamiliar environment.

Both said they probably learnt more than they would have if they had interned at companies back home.

The three publicly funded universities here say that more undergraduates are going overseas for their summer internships.

And they are not just packing their bags for major cities like Shanghai, Hong Kong or New York.

Among the new faces among students heading overseas to Africa, the Middle East and Central America.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) sent 200 students overseas for internships this year, up from 100 five years ago.

NTU, Director of the Career and Attachment Office, Mr Leong Hu Wee, said the university had been increasing the variety and choice of overseas experiences. He said 100 students went overseas for internships and work-and-study programmes last year.

At Singapore Management University (SMU), the only university here that requires all undergraduates to do a 10-week internship, over 4,300 have chosen to do overseas slots in the last five years.

While China and India are the most popular destinations, more than 100 students have gone to Middle Eastern countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia since 2010.

SMU’s international placements director, Ms Khoo Sau-Yan, and her team have dispensed advice to prospective students on how to prepare their applications with their overseas supervisors.

Through the programme, second-year undergraduate Nickie Tan, 20, took up the chance to work with a different culture.

She said: “Although I had difficulty communicating with the teachers because I could barely speak Spanish, I still learnt a lot from them by observing their interactions with the children.”

At NTU, a spokesman said that the university has been focusing its resources on developing internships opportunities for its students in countries where the Government has been exploring business opportunities. These include China, India, and nations in the Middle East.

“This would help build a talent pool to support these economic initiatives of the Government,” he said.

NTU’s Mr Oh, 24, and Mr Ruck, 25, have visited the premises of a country firm Singaporeans have invested in, before they left for the coastal state in west Africa. They thought it was a dangerous place, given its location in one of the most volatile regions in the continent.

But after they settled into their homes in the city of Tana, they felt safe in the country that Mr Oh once went jogging in his neighbourhood of Atlanta.

For their scholastic brains, Leong Lee, 23, tales of higher than usual in South Africa’s largest city of Johannesburg unfortunately turned out to be true, as he discovered while submitting at Winarint International’s office there. But he added that he did not anticipate any turmoil ahead as he kept to the safe areas.

All three said they were exposed to different ways of doing business in their host countries.

“In Singapore, we wouldn’t think of giving out free T-shirts to entice people to buy your cooking oil, but there, it generated a lot of buzz,” said Mr Khoo.

Their trips were made possible by a new scholarship programme started this year by Mr Khand Khosla (Hong), chairman and chief executive of Winarint International. The scholarship provides for internships in emerging markets such as Ghana, South Africa, Singapore and India.

Despite their varying experiences, all three said they would recommend an overseas internship to their peers.

Mr Oh said: “Ten weeks is a very short period of time, why not take this opportunity to get more exposure, out of your comfort zone?”