

A steep learning curve at work built her confidence, Central Provident Fund Board scholar Karen Chung tells Chan Seet Fun

ACCEPTING a scholarship should mean a lot more than just securing a sponsored university education. This is the firm belief of Central Provident Fund (CPF) Board scholar Karen Chung, 24.

Now an assistant manager at the Board's policy and research department, Ms Chung said: "I wanted a meaningful career that would allow me to make a difference." The National University of Singapore Business Administration graduate added: "You have to know what the organisation does. If you don't like it, you won't be happy and you won't do well."

If her recent promotion is anything to go by, she has been doing rather well. She joined the Board as a senior executive in January 2004, after "accelerating" her university course and completing it in three and a half years. She was promoted to assistant manager in April last year.

"The learning curve is steep. You start at

the deep end. But if you survive it, you come out more confident," she said.

She estimates that one's "newbie" status lasts about six months, after which things become more "comfortable". But the information overload never seems to stop.

"There is a lot of searching on the Internet, a lot of rationales to understand, a lot of registry files and e-mails to go through. When you understand the history of the issue, then you can move on," she said.

Her job scope centres on conducting research work that leads to policy. She gets involved in supporting parliamentary debate by anticipating questions and preparing the relevant background. She also gets assigned specific issues to work on.

Last July, she was involved in a housing review that required the coordination of various government bodies.

"It was really exciting," she said. "Naturally, there are different points of view. You have to learn how to tell people you don't agree with them. You have to be humble about it as well. Ultimately, you need to know where you belong in the whole chain," she said, adding that at the moment, she is "near the bottom".

Nonetheless, she is quite happy to be in the research and policy department. "Scholars are usually posted to these more 'macro' departments first to help them see the bigger picture," she said.

"The Board has been good to its scholars. There is a lot of support," she added. In fact, the support can begin even before a scholar's first day on the job.

During her undergraduate days, Ms Chung was fortunate to get the Board's financial support for a six-month exchange programme to Denmark, as well as for a three-week stint at Stanford University.

And when she needed to do her final-year project, she was able to obtain the Board's green light to conduct her field work at its customer services department.

For one month, she and three incognito research assistants camped out at the CPF Building to study how the Board's customer services officers handled various interactions. The idea was to determine how different personality traits affected the level of service they provided.

Not only did the field work contribute to her "A" grade, it also gave her a lot of insights into what the CPF Board does.

"I also got to know the staff in the process. It definitely made it easier to ask them for things later on! And there are more people to say 'Hi' to when you come back," she said.

*Chan Seet Fun is a freelance writer.*

# Getting the bigger picture on a policy

“You also have to learn how to tell people you don't agree with them. You have to be humble about it as well. Ultimately, you need to know where you belong in the whole chain.”

MS KAREN CHUNG

