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As a student at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Work-Integrated Experience (WIE) is an integral part of your learning experience. It provides you with distinct and practical advantages in today's competitive world.

It is vital that graduates possess both "hard" and "soft" skills to ensure career success. The on-campus part of your course seeks to equip you with theoretical and technical knowledge. Your WIE will help you build the "soft" and practical skills needed to become a rounded professional and competent practitioner in your chosen sector from day one.

This handbook is designed to help you maximise the benefits of engaging in work experience. It is the result of the PolyU's years of experience in operating WIE programmes and is also derived from a recent cross-departmental study of WIE placements from the perspectives of students and employers.

The Faculty-Wide/Cross Department Learning & Teaching Development Project 2005-2008 has enabled us to identify best practices and potential pitfalls arising from WIE programmes. We have also, where relevant, drawn from similar studies conducted overseas, and from the World Association for Cooperative Education, Inc.

Introduction

This study, entitled Learning Through Off-campus Work-integrated Education, was conducted by the following departments and members:



School of Hotel & Tourism Management:

Mr Tony Tse (Project Leader), Dr Simon Wong, Dr Sylvester Yeung, Dr Benny Chan, Mr Chris Luk;



Dept of Industrial & Systems Engineering:

Dr Winco Yung;



Institute of Textiles & Clothing:

Dr Zhi-ming Zhang;



Student Affairs Office:

Mrs Dorinda Fung.

A number of the specific findings gleaned from student and employer feedback in the study have been quoted and are referred to in the body of this handbook. In the interests of narrative flow, we have reserved most of the study details for the appendix. We have also included a summary of dos and don'ts gleaned from the text which we hope will prove a useful check list.

Students in all departments at PolyU are required to participate in one or more Work-Integrated Education (WIE) programmes during their time at the university. The objective of WIE is to help you develop a range of valuable generic attributes and to apply theories to real-life situations.

The following satisfy the WIE requirement:

- A full-time placement of at least 10 months in a suitable organisation as part of a "sandwich" programme
- A summer placement in a suitable organisation participating in the 'Preferred Graduate' Development Programme
- Any other placement in any suitable external organisation for a specified period of time
- A clinical placement in hospitals/clinics or in PolyU health clinics
- Any collection of community service programmes of an acceptable aggregate duration

About the PolyU's WIE Programmes

- Any job found by the student in an external organisation and deemed to be suitable by the Department and the Dean of meeting the requirement of WIE. The job must be declared by the student in advance to give the Department the opportunity to assess it for suitability
- Relevant placements as student helpers in PolyU administrative departments and the Industrial Centre
- Assisting in PolyU activities that have an external collaboration or service component
- Workplace attachment through the International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience
- Final-year degree project involving an industrial partner or external client

Your department/school/faculty sets specific requirements. They can vary from summer jobs to long-term industry placements of up to 48 weeks depending on your course of study.

You, however, are expected to be proactive. The PolyU has contacts and placements but this should not deter you from seeking out opportunities yourself. You should also participate actively in your work experience and seek feedback and advice.

Obviously students are expected to be enthusiastic, open-minded and willing to learn. In strictly practical terms, you should be punctual from the first interview to the last day of work.

You are expected to be properly groomed and dressed appropriately.

You are expected to show initiative in discovering as much as possible about your WIE employer and understand what is expected of you during the placement before you start at work. We at the PolyU encourage you to be proactive; to ask for training plans, feedback and coaching. You are not expected to settle for weeks of idleness.

What is Expected of Students Engaged on WIE





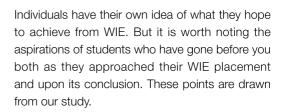


But you must also be flexible and willing to start at the bottom. You will have to perform chores as part of your assignment but you should not settle for performing unskilled work for the duration of your WIE.

You are required to complete written reports of your WIE for submission to the PolyU as an integral part of your course. Your department/ school/faculty sets such requirements and you will be aware of them before you embark on WIE.







Most students say that their self-perception improves significantly after their placement.

While some students, especially those close to graduating, hope a placement will lead to their first job, the benefit singled out as of primary importance by the majority of students in our study was practical hands-on experience.

This is related to the second-ranked benefit: providing them with a clearer view of what the future holds. Also high in the ranking was the opportunity to take part in real-life team work.

Employers surveyed in the study noted the areas in which students required the greatest assistance was in preparation and understanding precisely

What Students Can Hope to Achieve from WIE





what was demanded of them. This is useful to remember when preparing for your assignment.



One particularly interesting point revealed in our study was the improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem that many students reported after completing their WIE experience. Students become more able to accept responsibility and work as a team member.

Supervisors can help foster the confidence, leading to an improved professional demeanour by actively nudging and coaching students and by ensuring good two-way communication channels. It is up to students to take full advantage of such provisions.



It is worth remembering that while you are furthering your practical education, employers, too, expect to benefit. These benefits can range from a generalised "feel-good" factor resulting from a wish to aid young people in their life choices, to hard-nosed financial gains, particularly in the field of recruitment.

Employers expect to gain access to useful, enthusiastic workers already equipped with the theoretical basics required at a reasonable wage.

Benefits of WIE to Employers





Some employers are looking to identify and evaluate good future employees and provide them with early-bird training, therefore reducing both the expense and wastage rate that accompanies the recruitment process. In the longer term, welltrained graduates, particularly those already versed in the culture of the company where they experienced WIE, cut the cost to employers of entry-level training, wastage and orientation.







What Makes a Successful Work Placement





WIE is designed to be an industry-based, on-thejob, structured and measurable learning experience for students. It aims to provide you with the opportunity to apply theoretical learning to real-life situations at work. In short, tackling and learning from tasks and problems in the real workplace.

Ideally, PolyU students are placed within a sector or industry relevant to their academic studies. However, this is not always possible. In such cases, you will have to accept placements in a business or institution that can provide you with generalised work experience.

In either case, there are two basic points to be emphasised: structured and measurable.

"Structured" means that work experience should be purposefully designed to reach learning goals and not just occur incidentally or as a side effect of work.

Student learning should be "measurable" in that you are required to document your experiences. These can include reports, journals or assembling portfolios. You should also receive substantive feedback from your WIE employer.

Students usually benefit more from the workplace experience if there is adequate rotation of duties during the placement.

Most employers prefer longer-term placements so that students get the opportunity to practise what they have learnt and to allow sufficient time for coaching.

Ideal Types of Work Placement

There are broad themes that many students will find useful when seeking or considering WIE assignments. These include but are not limited to:

On-the-job learning: Basic practical tasks such as (in the case of hotel/tourism students) clerking, checking-in guests, filing, making beds, cutting carrots, photocopying, inventory checking, and answering the phone. These are examples of useful skills for students to acquire, as well as learning "from the bottom up".

However it is important that you are rotated through a variety of on-the-job-training tasks to provide you with a broad sub-set of skills and experiences. You should not be treated merely as cheap labour fulfilling repetitive tasks.



Apprenticeships: This requires the students to be assigned a master or coach to pass on specialist skills. The master must have the time, expertise and willingness to teach, so apprenticeships are better suited to longer-term placements.

Projects: By their nature, projects are of a shortterm or modular nature and are ideally suited to WIE students. Projects are often demanding tasks for regular employees who have to weave them into their regular and, these days increasingly busy, work-day. Properly briefed and supervised, you are ideally suited to relieving this burden. In addition, certain projects can prove useful for senior students who are required to complete a "capstone project" as part of your course.

Breadth of Experience

Top of the list of aspirations cited by students in our study is job rotation. When going out into the world they said they were keen to put their theoretical knowledge to use and expand their horizons. Gaining exposure to a variety of tasks and roles was the most-mentioned concern. A WIE programme is particularly successful when it provides such opportunities.

Communications.

The transition from campus life to a business environment can be a big step into the unknown. It is therefore important that your WIE employer establishes practical two-way channels of communication to ensure both sides know what is expected and that you make sure to use these channels appropriately.

Getting Started

Our study showed that successful WIE programmes contained the following factors. This is worth bearing in mind when considering offers and you should not be shy in checking whether such provisions will be made.

Agreements: Ideally, you should receive clear, written instructions on practicalities such as remuneration, dress code, work hours, duties (and duration of tasks if they are to be rotated) AHEAD of starting work.

Mentors: The provision of a "point person" to serve as a guide, mentor, sounding board and provider of feedback (both direct and indirect) is invaluable.





Orientation: An orientation course at the start of a placement is vital. This can, for example, include a who's who, guidance on how to address staff of various levels of seniority, tours of facilities and inhouse jargon. You are required to research your work placement ahead of arrival but the amount of information in the public domain is by nature. limited.



Culture shock: Those students placed in assignments outside Hong Kong in the past say they appreciated an orientation course, and tips on living as well as working in the particular town or country. In addition, being assigned a member of staff, often a younger member, to act as an informal "big brother" or "big sister" can be a useful way of banishing cultural and linguistic uncertainties.

Numbers: Feedback from our study shows that when a group of five or more students from PolyU were accepted by a single institution, they found it easier to pick up professional vocabulary and demeanour. This appears to be partly because they get the opportunity to practise their newfound knowledge within the safety-net of a pool of friends.

On the other hand, you must resist the temptation to spend too much time within your "safe" peergroup and ensure you make the effort to launch yourself into new experiences and interact fully with company personnel.

Everyone has heard anecdotal WIE horror stories. About the student who acted as if she was doing her WIE employer a favour in just turning up, to the heartless employer who assigned the student to months of humping boxes in a warehouse.

The truth is less dramatic. It primarily centres on lack of preparation, poor attitude, a mismatch between the student's skills and the company's needs. On the employer's side, a lack of planning, unrealistic expectations, a lack of work-tasks and weak feedback can scupper what could have been a promising placement.

This should be borne in mind, particularly when a student seeks his or her own placement independent of the PolyU. Thought has to be given as to whether the company has roles that you can realistically fulfil.

What Makes a Poor Work Placement





Next, it has to be established that the company has the will and resources to assign staff to plan your WIE placement, supervise and provide feedback in addition to his or her regular duties.

While everyone has to start at the bottom, you will gain little from drudge work, for example weeks on end of photocopying or messenger duty. Conversely, you risk getting out of your depth if you are required to carry out unfamiliar and overly specialised advanced tasks that are beyond your academic level and training. Ensure the jobs expected of you are appropriate and that proper training will be provided.



It is never too early to start planning and preparing for your WIE. Your department/school/faculty will have guidelines in place on getting started, tips and introductions to employers etc.

In practical terms, keep your CV and, if relevant, your portfolio, up to date. Ensure your wardrobe contains suitable items for interviews.

Keep an eye open for opportunities yourself. Maintain contacts with companies you have worked for previously, if relevant, and tap friends and relatives for suitable introductions. Monitor company recruitments in the media for possible openings. Keep a list of contacts gleaned from job ads – when job-hunting, it is always easier when it is possible to contact a named individual.

Preparation





Consider getting business cards printed with your name, contacts and field of study.

Keep an open mind. You never know. You may find your placement opens up new opportunities for jobs you had not previously envisaged as part of your career path.











- Research the company before work starts
- Ask for a Staff or Trainee Manual and read it
- Seek a training plan
- Discuss the training plan with supervisors
- Ask for and attend orientation sessions.
- Seek a mentor
- Organise means for you to share experiences with fellow students
- Ensure your work is monitored and assessed within the company and seek timely feedback.
 Complete your written course requirements
- Actively seek and use channels to obtain feedback to the appropriate personnel within your company; do not be shy about asking for advice and help
- Seek inclusion in departmental staff meetings and planning sessions when feasible
- Seek appropriate wages and/or allowances, but be realistic – you are a trainee
- Seek exposure to as many different departments, tasks or roles as possible

Summary: Dos and Don'ts

- Accept appropriate levels of responsibility for tasks and build up to tackling more challenging roles as you grow in the job
- · Seek out and guestion older students and lecturers about their experiences in the workplace where relevant

Don'ts

- Do not allow yourself to be treated as cheap, unskilled labour; for example, carrying out endless photocopying, handing out leaflets, being a messenger or warehouse labourer
- Ensure you don't get out of your depth for example, handling customer complaints in your first few days
- Avoid taking a position where a high degree of confidentiality is required. This will adversely affect the scope of your project reports and the ability to share your experiences with your peers and temporary work colleagues
- Don't be a quitter when the going gets tough. Should your WIE not work out, consult your supervisors and try and sort things out before taking the drastic step of resigning
- Don't be prejudiced against small company employers. It could be there is more scope for job rotation in small companies than in the famous multi-nationals

The study, entitled Learning Through Off-campus Work-integrated Education, comprised three parts: (1) a student survey by questionnaire, (2) in-depth student interviews and (3) an industry partner survey.

Part 1: Student survey by questionnaire

A total of 325 students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University were invited to complete the survey in 2007 to gauge attitudes before and after their placement. The students were from the Faculty of Business, Faculty of Applied Science & Textiles, Faculty of Communication, Faculty of Construction & Land Use, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Health & Social Sciences, School of Hotel & Tourism Management and School of Design. All undertook their placements during their summer vacation.

The students were each asked to rate themselves according to 17 statements based on a Likert-scale of "1=strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree", both before and after their placement. The shift in ratings is used to reflect the change of students' self-perception in respect of the 17 statements.

The 17 statements were:

- 1. I have good understanding about relevant computer software for our profession
- 2. I have updated professional knowledge
- 3. I possess effective reading skills
- 4. I possess effective writing skills
- 5. I can communicate effectively in foreign language

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- I can define and solve problems effectively
- 7. I am able to work cooperatively with others such as a team member
- 8. I am able to work independently with minimal supervision
- I am willing to accept responsibility
- 10. I am adaptable and flexible to cope with a changing work environment
- 11. I have good presentation skills
- 12. I possess good professional attitude
- 13. I can manage other people's problems with understanding and sensitivity
- 14. I have genuine desire to help people
- 15. I can lead others effectively
- 16. Lam honest
- 17. Lam creative

Part 2: In-depth student interview

Fifteen students from the Faculty of Business, Faculty of Applied Science and Textiles, School of Hotel & Tourism Management and School of Design who completed internships in 2006 or 2007 were invited to participate in group discussions or telephone interviews. The internships undertaken by the 15 students were in the following sectors: hotels, theme parks, accounting, banking, biotechnology, design, real estate services and transportation. Placements took place in Hong Kong, mainland China, the U.K. and U.S.

Students were asked about their experiences, important things they learned, likes and dislikes, problems encountered, good practices in their workplace and for any suggestions.

Part 3: Industry partner survey

A telephone survey was conducted among 140 industry partners who provided placements to PolyU students in September 2007. Respondents were asked to rate student interns according to 14 statements on a Likert-scale ranging from "1=Unacceptable performance" to "5=Excellent performance". The mean score of each statement was used as an indication of employers' perceptions about PolyU students during their placements.

The 14 statements were:

- 1. Student arrived on time to work as scheduled
- 2. Student arrived to work in uniform/proper dressing as expected
- 3. Student came to work prepared
- 4. Student displayed appropriate behaviour
- 5. Student used professional language as expected
- 6. Student displayed professionalism
- 7. Student asked for work as appropriate
- 8. Student displayed positive attitude
- 9. Student was suited to this type of work
- 10. Student was eager to learn
- 11. Student was capable to understand demands of department
- 12. Student was genuinely interested in the responsibility of this organisation
- 13. Student worked well with others
- 14. Student accepted responsibility

