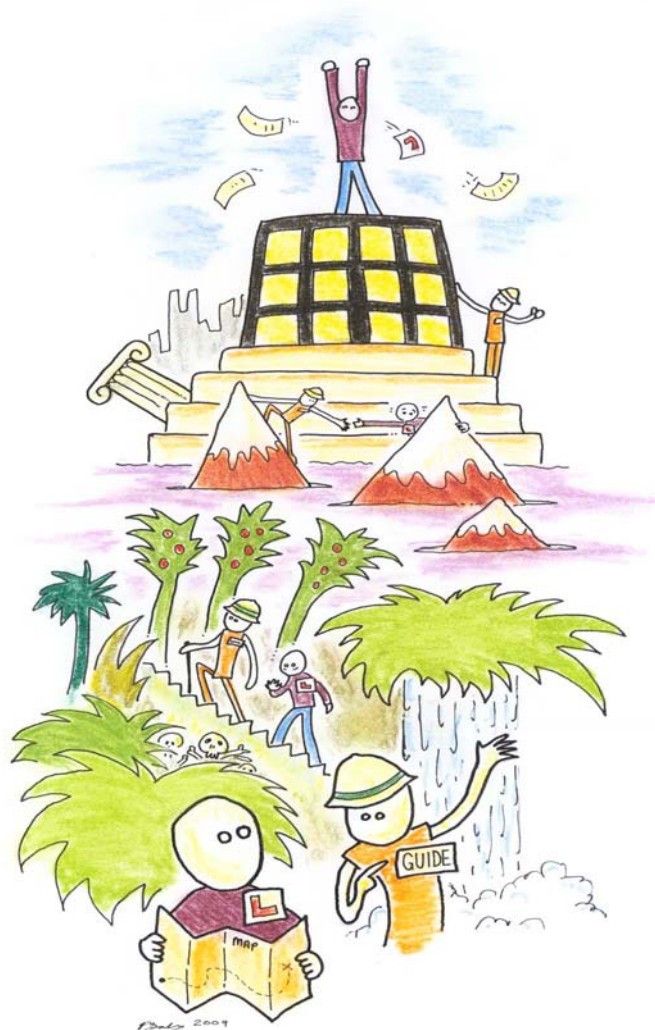


## Learning to Be Professional: Student stories of their Professional Training Year



**SCEPTrE**

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in Professional Training and Education

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The Professional Training Year (PTY) experience is the first major transition for many students from university life into the professional world of work. This booklet draws out the lessons from the collective experiences of learning to be professional of twenty-eight returning placement students from a range of academic disciplines and professional fields. The intended aims are twofold: to serve as a reflective account of students' experiences of learning to be professional and to provide practical advice for future placement students

The stories were contributed by 28 students to a story-writing competition sponsored by the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education (SCEPTre) on the theme of learning to be professional. All student quotations and organisation references have been anonymised. The text has been enhanced with cartoons drawn by SCEPTre's artist in residence Patrick Sanders (prhsuk@yahoo.co.uk). Research and analysis was conducted by SCEPTre staff Lori Riley (loriley4u@hotmail.com), January 2009. Individual stories can be viewed at <http://learningtobeprofessional.pbwiki.com/>

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## Understanding the context of the work environment

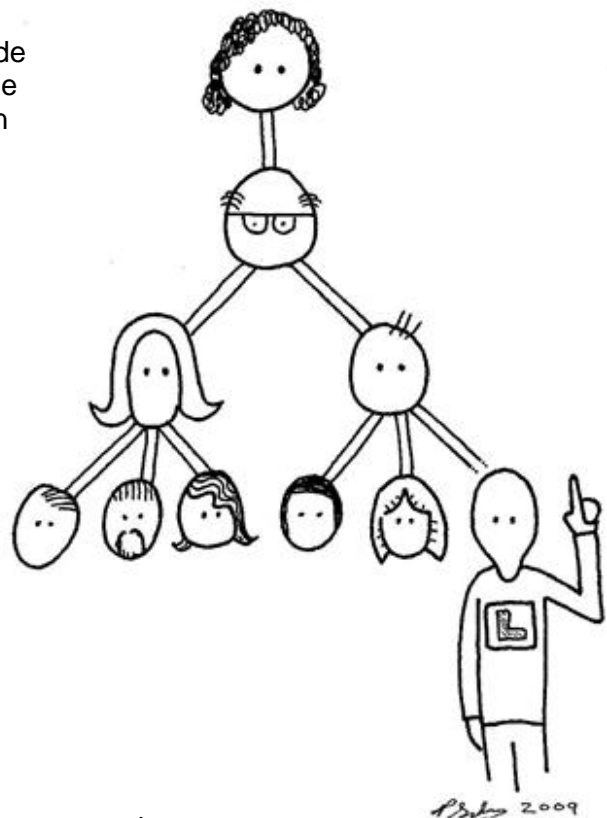


Throughout their stories, returning placement students were keen to demonstrate a strong awareness of the technical context of their working environments. Students described the subtle nuances of their daily work routines using highly developed terminology. This evidence suggests they have developed an acute 'insiders' understanding of their work speciality, which distinguishes them from 'outsiders' to that work context. Within this specialised context of the work environment, three key themes emerged focusing upon the organisational structure, tasks and people.

### **Organisational structure: "Where Do I Fit?"**

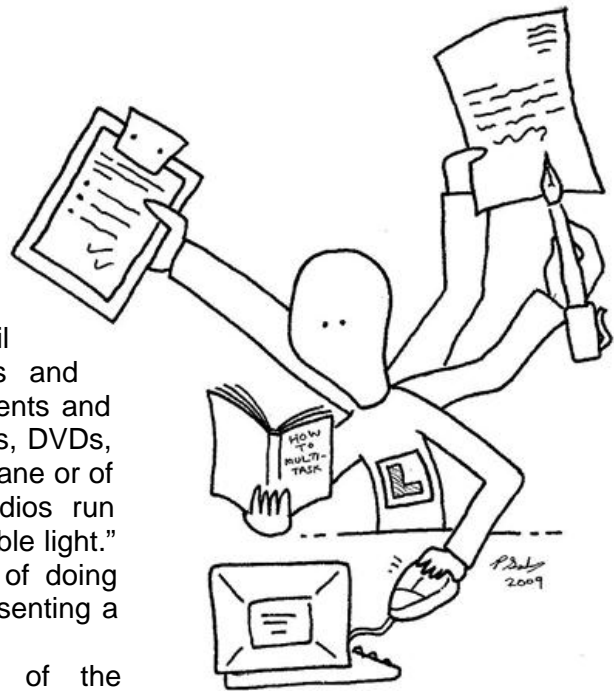
Students found placements within a wide range of organisational structures, from large global enterprises to small offices of less than five employees. More than simply memorising the organisational tree diagram, students began to internalise how their organisational structures were animated for operating on a daily basis. One student distinguished the division between strategy and tactics in his organisational structure: "Each programme would have a programme leader and a programme manager. The leader works on the strategy, observes the market and plans for the future. The manager looks after the day-to-day running of the programme and implements the marketing plays." By understanding how the management functions were specially differentiated, the student has tapped into an appreciation of the functional organisational structure.

More than only the staff structure, students reflected upon the organisation of the physical environment itself. "The office itself was designed to foster an open environment and demonstrate transparency. All the walls in the building were glass so you could see exactly what everyone was doing, even your manager." The transparency of the physical environment was also reflected in the working relationships within this organisation.



### **Tasks: “What Am I Doing Here?”**

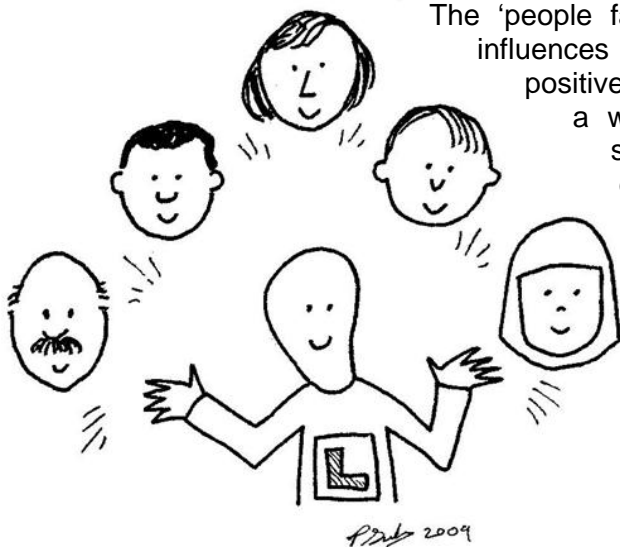
The level of responsibility students were given for tasks varied significantly. Many students anticipated and performed a certain range of mundane tasks, but most tackled them with a good attitude. One student in the media industry explained, “My other duties include taking mail to the post office, tidying of the studios and corridors, giving studio tours and talks to clients and keeping a stock check of resources (e.g. CDs, DVDs, tapes). Whilst most of these tasks seem mundane or of low responsibility, they all ensure the studios run smoothly and are presented in the best possible light.” This student has identified the importance of doing even the small, simple tasks well and of presenting a well-run organisation to external clients.



Other employers took advantage of the students' own educational experiences and offered special research projects. “Within my role as Project Evaluator I was asked to conduct an eleven-month research project... The main activities conducted whilst on placement include a literature review, production of a research proposal with suggested methodologies, data collection and analysis and report writing. The findings from the study were presented in the form of an evaluation report and various presentations.” This student's practical experience closely mirrored her university training and provided fruitful research for her employer.

Ultimately, the students who proactively sought wider variety of tasks came away from their placements with far broader skill sets than they may have anticipated. One student explained how he used his initiative to gain competency in a broader range of tasks, thus enabling him to experience the complete life cycle of his project: “Throughout the year I became increasingly familiar with the many standard operating procedures (SOP) the team had to adhere to for all aspects of work, development, support duties or otherwise... I completed several projects and one-off tasks, eventually experiencing all areas of the IT system development life cycle, whilst additionally attending to my other regular tasks.” Although many placements may appear to offer a limited set of tasks, students can often observe and perform novel tasks simply by asking the right people.

### **People: “Who are the main actors in my world of work?”**



The ‘people factor’ was clearly one of the most critical influences upon students' working environments, both positively and negatively. Students were exposed to a wide variety of people from different roles, status levels, and cultural backgrounds. In every professional field, “Working makes you realise how important having good relationships with the people you work with is. After all, you do see them everyday and getting along makes a big difference to your job satisfaction.”

The best role models demonstrate how professionalism is embodied in the field. Mentors may tacitly exude internal traits of determination and commitment

which have enabled them to achieve higher management levels. "I had a great mentor at my placement. She was great at her job and extremely hard working. Knowing people in a professional sphere is also a great way to become professional yourself. My personal mentor, along with all my work colleagues at my placement have been great examples of what it means to be professional in a work place." This sort of knowing can only be gained through direct interaction and observation in a situation where the mentor and mentee are similarly engaged in professional work.

Students may also need to adapt to how their mentors choose to impart knowledge. One student observed how two sound engineers delegated responsibility to her differently: one preferred to handle all the technical details himself while she observed and asked questions; another engineer allowed her to run the equipment hands-on from the first day. Just as university tutors have different styles of teaching, placement supervisors may have different styles of instruction.

In the most positive capacity, people in effective working relationships contribute synergy to their teams. Networks can achieve more corporately than individually. Yet along with the power contained in people skills, students also experienced the potential of negative 'office politics.' "I was introduced to the concept of 'office politics', something that goes unmentioned at university and you cannot prepare for until you face it. Office politics is the use of power within the organisation to personal gain. It's about who you know and how much they can influence situations to your favour. Knowing the right people can determine how successful you will be in achieving your personal goals." Although 'politics' may be inevitable in most workplaces, students offered simple advice: "It is wise not to mix and stir it up."

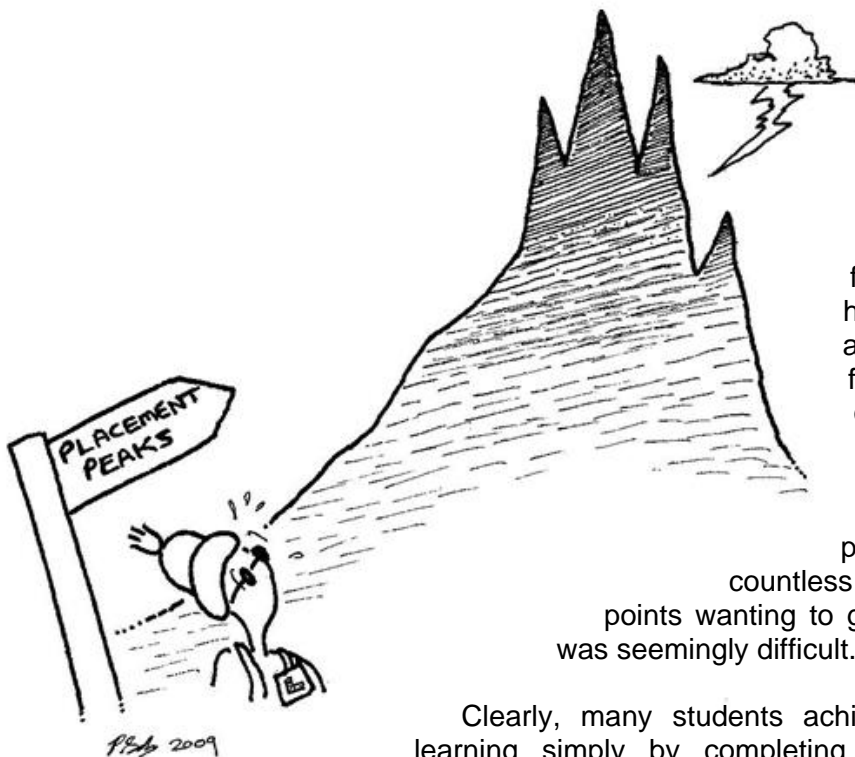
## Significant experiential learning moments



Although learning may occur gradually throughout the year-long placement, certain pivotal learning moments stood out more prominently for many students. These moments generally occurred early on during the application process and initial training period and later on during pinnacle points of challenges and achievements.

### ***Application process***

Even before their first day of work, students already gained professional experience by simply surviving the sometimes gruelling process of finding and applying for jobs.

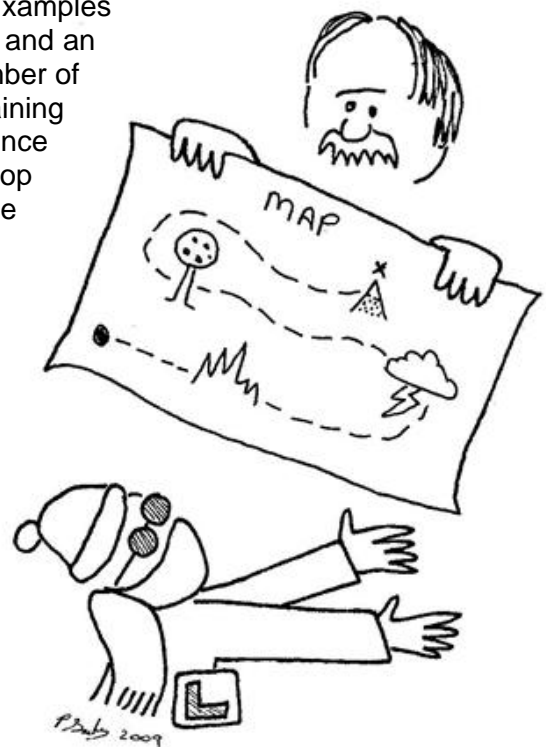


"The application process at first was very stressful and demanding because most companies make industrial placement students go through the same application route of filling in a company form, having an interview and assessment centre, as they do for graduates. This adds to the challenge of finding a placement, because as a level 2 student, you are put through a very competitive process. I remember filling in countless application forms, and at points wanting to give up as the whole process was seemingly difficult."

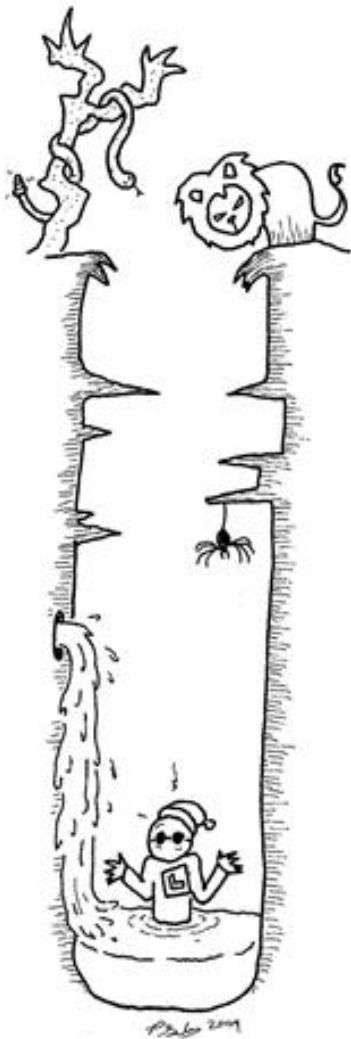
Clearly, many students achieved significant professional learning simply by completing the application process to successfully acquire a placement contract. The ability to represent themselves and the qualities they could bring to the job in ways that were appealing to the company is an important dimension of professional communication.

## Training

Upon starting their placements, some students enjoyed focused orientation and training programmes. Examples included an initial handover period with the prior intern and an hour-long orientation meeting with each individual member of their team. Some additional on the job training opportunities included conflict resolution and violence reduction courses, and 'Mind Gym' courses to develop soft skills. At worst though, other students received little or no formal training during orientation. In one particularly difficult placement experience, the recently redundant managers provided no handover to the incoming student who was left to absorb a great deal of responsibility. Although the 'sink or swim' method may be the most startling manner of learning, the gains were no less genuine: "I was put straight in at the deep end when I began and although this was quite scary to begin with, I found that it was by far the best way to learn in that situation and hence I got to grips with the different aspects of my role a lot quicker than I would have done had I been eased into the job slowly!" Hence, students should be prepared for a variety of styles of training on the job.



### **Challenges: “I never knew there’d be days like this...”**

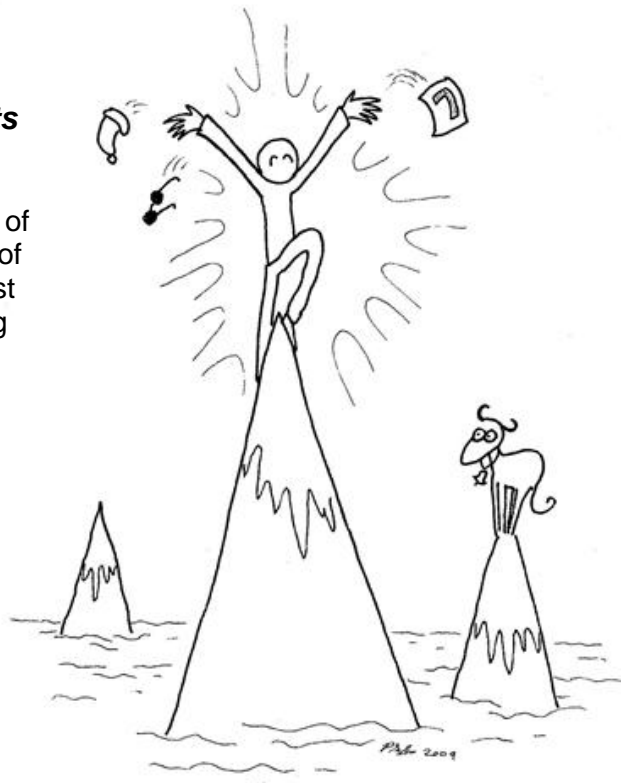


Most challenges which students faced in the workplace were unlike anything they had encountered during their prior education. Students learned to cope with colleagues on strike, misbehaving pupils, low staff morale and angry clients. More than one organisation suffered from the threat of going into administration. Yet perhaps one of the greatest frustrations was a sense of paralysis for an individual to make significant changes in their organisation: “Certainly one of the biggest problems I faced (when the company was going into administration) was that I couldn’t fix the problem myself.” This lack of personal agency in the face of a massive organisational breakdown challenged the student to make the best of a difficult situation.

Other challenges coincided with the natural ‘daily grind’ of the workplace, which students eventually learned to accept. “There are times when I have been bored and completely frustrated by long menial tasks that have no end in sight. The number of times I have stressed when I have had hundreds of pages to photocopy for an immediate deadline and someone has jammed the photocopier. However, all these issues represent realities of full time employment, which come part in parcel of experiencing to be a professional.” Ultimately students learned to cope with the routine frustrations, the pivotal challenge points, as well as the requirements of writing a substantial PTY report in the process of becoming professional.

### **Achievements**

From overcoming the depths of challenges, students rose to the heights of significant achievements. One of the most clearly evident achievements was advancing from menial routine tasks into progressive levels of responsibility in their workload. One student proactively volunteered to cover additional tasks when a colleague was on maternity leave. Another student was granted the responsibility to manage a new café as a reward for improved levels of dedication and professionalism. A common factor among these accounts of increased responsibility was the heightened need for personal management skills – whether it was managing time, priorities, resources, task lists or projects.





Yet, not all students welcomed the volume of increased responsibilities they were given. One student explained, “Dropped into the deep end once again, I was sent off alone with a camera to various locations across the country... At this point I was beginning to feel increasingly frustrated with (my company) for giving me perhaps too much responsibility for the little experience I had... I was delegated jobs that were indeed out of my league, simply because I was the only person who was available to undertake them.” Unfortunately in some organisations, placement students may have been the only staff available to fill the miscellaneous void of ‘all other tasks as required,’ even if they were not always well suited to the ability level.

However most students could identify significant personal achievements gained from their placement experiences. Students described feelings of internal satisfaction, such as feeling good about contributions to a learning support team or feeling honoured and proud to lobby for a climate change bill. These internal achievements had powerful impacts: “I could never have imagined that the feeling of doing my job well would be so rewarding. It may sound cliché, but it’s the truth.” Other students received more tangible rewards. A chemistry student presented her research project results at an international conference and anticipates it will be published within the year. Other achievements included: being credited as a performer and assistant engineer on several recorded albums; attending a three-day VIP cruise for a successful marketing project; and winning a company leadership award. These high achievements marked milestones in the process of becoming a professional.

## Connections to Life-Wide Learning

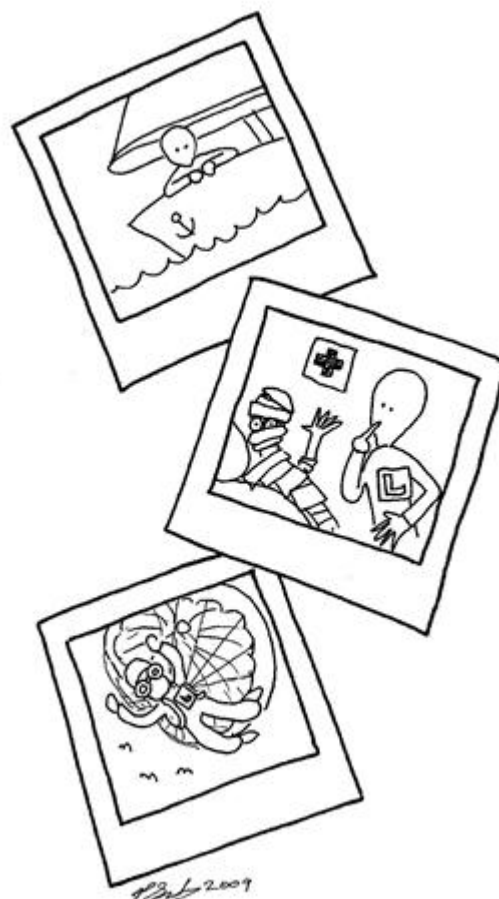
Placement students were encouraged to reflect on their life experiences outside of the professional workplace. SCEPTRE believes that any worthwhile learning endeavour must engage not only with a depth of subject-specific knowledge, but also with a breadth of potentially physical, emotional, or cultural links across a life-wide curriculum. Hence, students’ accounts revealed themes centred on interests outside of work, cultural immersion, and emotional experiences.



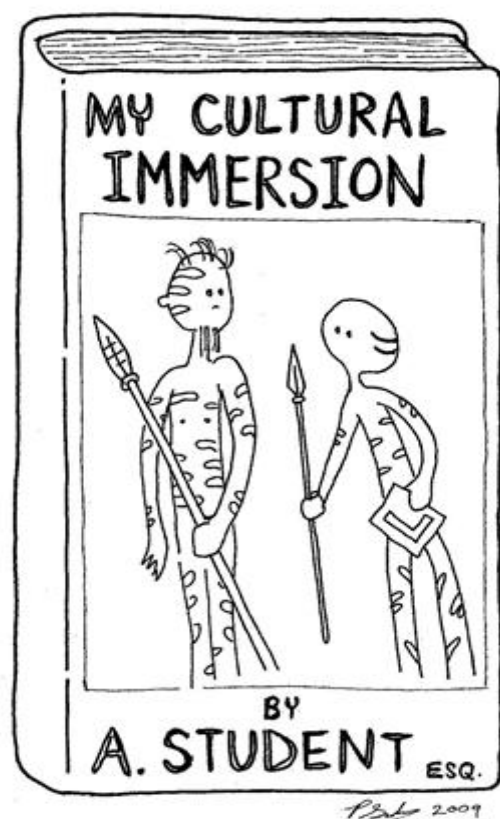


**Interests outside of work:**  
***"What do I do with the rest of my life?"***

Students may be accustomed to maintaining personal interests outside of university, but how do they balance these interests while working in a full-time job? One student found that the demands of long working hours in the media industry left very little space for anything outside of work. Yet other innovative students found productive uses for their newly acquired free time, including taking courses in first-aid, foreign languages, driving, knitting, and creative writing. One student on her placement abroad described adventures of travel, skiing, skydiving, surfing, and sailing. Yet others viewed their placement as an opportunity to maximise their social lives with new colleagues and friends. At best, an active social life with colleagues over meals and sporting events away from work was beneficial for building team camaraderie. Yet at worst, one manager confronted a student about his misguided priority on climbing the social ladder, which detracted from his work tasks and professionalism – something which he later strived to correct.



**Cultural immersion: *"It's a strange world out there."***



Arguably, all students encountered the cultural immersion of adjusting to a new organisational culture, but some students encountered culture shock at a more personal level while choosing to live abroad. Three students described their cultural transitions in their placements abroad in New Zealand, Finland or France. One student working at a hotel in New Zealand experienced a double sense of culture shock, by acclimatising to both the organisational culture of the hospitality industry and the foreign culture of New Zealand, but eventually found the experience was the best year of her life. Another student in Finland gradually transitioned from a state of culture shock into building appreciation for her host culture: "Culture shock soon turned into fondness after I learned just how organized and efficient Finland is. I became more culturally aware of the small differences between Finland and England and so learned to adopt some of the Finnish customs in order to respect their culture."

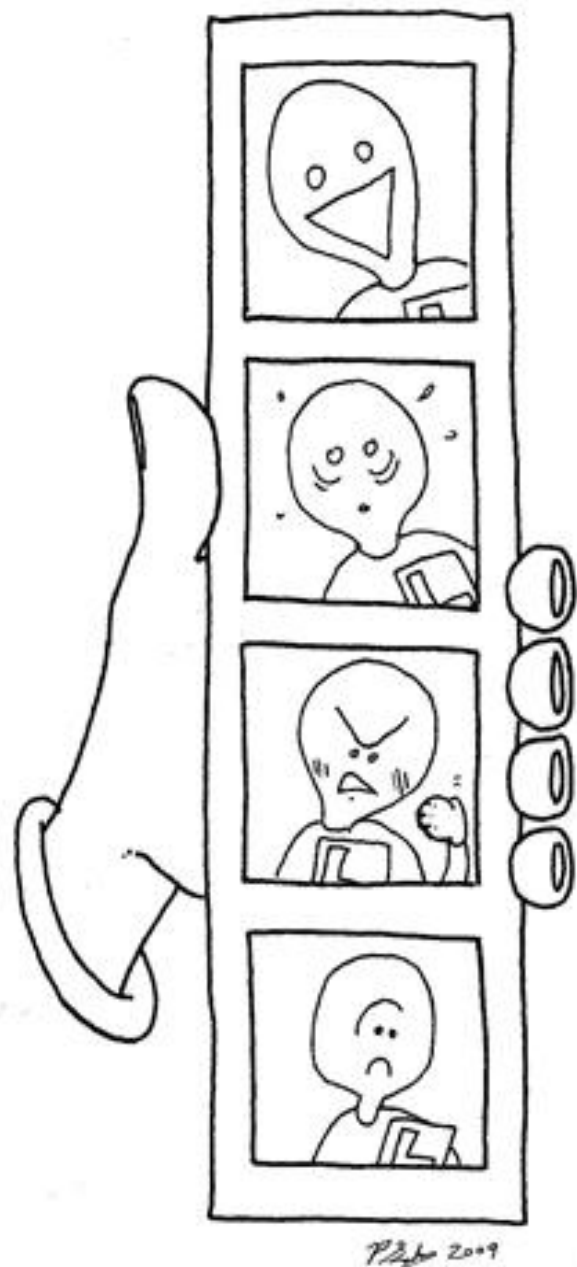
Culture shock was not necessarily limited to students moving to foreign countries, as several students adjusted to the cultural

immersion of moving to new locations across the UK. For some, this was the first occasion to move into a flat on their own away from home or university residency. "Much like I had swapped (my hometown) for Surrey at the beginning of my university career, placement saw me county-hopping again this time to (a new location) and moving to a small, picturesque town far removed from the bustling streets of Guildford. However, in this sense the move to university itself had proved I was already capable of making this kind of change in my life, whilst also making something successful and positive out of it."

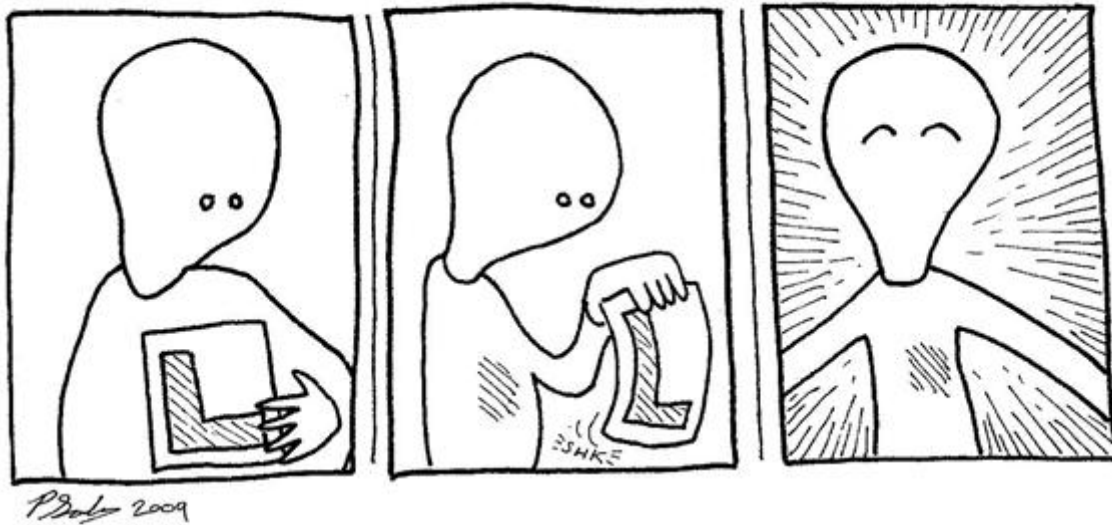
### **Emotional experiences**

Often, the emotional experience of learning can be under-acknowledged (particularly in the classroom) but nonetheless significant toward life-wide development. Students invariably described a rollercoaster of emotions throughout the placement process. From the initial stages of searching for a placement, students experienced overwhelming number of options and doubts over personal abilities or panic over potential inadequacy which later proved to be unfounded. One student working in a prison learned to transform his feelings of fear and intimidation into a sense of calm confidence under pressure. Others summed up a range of emotions: "The year spent at (my company) was enjoyable, challenging, stressful, fascinating, exciting, a great opportunity and a steep learning curve."

At best, students described their pinnacle emotions as feelings of pride, confidence, and independence or feelings of satisfaction and belonging to a team. Yet others found the emotional challenges of the work environment far more strenuous than any prior educational setting. One student chose to make the best of an emotionally difficult situation: "Working life is hard but you have to actively take steps to allow yourself to take away the positive from a situation and treat it as a learning curve. Over my thirteen months on my placement, I had never been so consistently *miserable* in my life, but if that had not happened I would not be thicker skinned, increased my tolerance level and equipped myself with such a massive amount of knowledge and skills."



## Learning to be professional

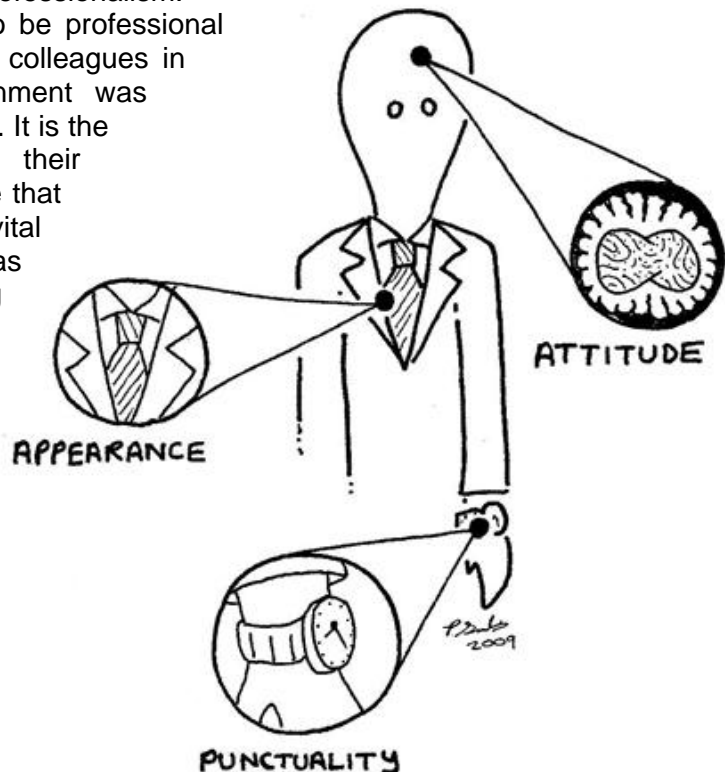


### *How students articulate what it means to be professional*



The placement experience enabled students to articulate what the concept of becoming a professional embodied. At the most foundational level, being professional was described as developing the correct “appearance, punctuality and attitude to work.” One student found that a finely tuned sense of professional etiquette was manifested through all the small details of how to address clients and when to speak up or keep quiet. Another mark of becoming professional was negotiating what degree of formality was appropriate: “A skill that I had to learn very quickly was assessing how to interact with different clients and gauge the appropriate balance of informality to professionalism.”

For other students, learning to be professional was gained through interactions with colleagues in the workplace. “The work environment was essential to me becoming professional. It is the mirroring of your co-workers and their professional manner in the work place that is the educational tool in this vital experience.” Professionalism was enhanced not only by mirroring mentors in the field, but also by conveying this trait to fellow colleagues. One student improved his own sense of professionalism by mentoring a younger work experience student: “A few times I had to remind him that he was in a professional environment and that understanding how to behave professionally would benefit him in the future.”



***Putting university training into practice:  
“Using what I learned from all those 9AM lectures.”***

Many students agreed that part of becoming professional was the ability to transfer theoretical knowledge from the classroom into real-world practical application. A psychology student utilised techniques taught in research methods and statistics courses, while a business student witnessed SWOT and cost-benefit lessons from organisational behaviour come into practice. Students also found that concepts from university lessons had more significant consequences when applied in the workplace: “Although I had studied project management at University and produced a number of theoretical documents in regards to coordinating projects and events, I had not had many opportunities to put my knowledge into practice. A unique factor about placement is that you get to experience the realities of working in the professional environment; if things did not go to plan then there would be genuine consequences.” Evidently, classroom lessons carried more weight when applied in a real-world context.

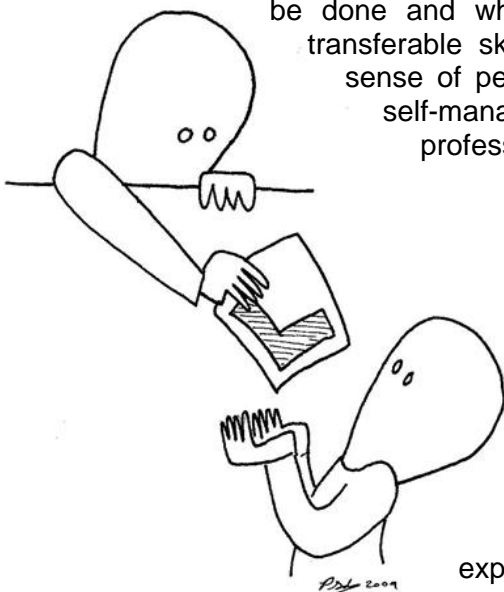


***Maximizing personal agency***

Ultimately students can develop a strong sense of personal agency through the process of learning to be professional. Agency can be developed by realising an individual's potential power or proactively taking control of one's actions. One student working as a lobbyist for a climate change bill found new opportunities for taking initiative locally, relying on increased confidence, and putting ideas into action. Another student proactively took advantage of every opportunity possible for joining as many free courses offered by his company. A media student maximised her agency by proactively anticipating the needs of her workplace: “When I was not needed on a session, I used my initiative to find things to do, for example creating a standard session sheet for logging signal paths. I always tried to anticipate what was needed so that when I was asked to do something, I could say that it was already done.”

One way of developing personal agency may be to cultivate both creativity and technical precision. Students who find themselves ambidextrous in both left-brain and right-brain thinking may enjoy greater professional advancement opportunities. One student in the media industry relied on both creativity and technical expertise in recording sessions as she combined her musical background and sound engineering skills. Another student wrestled with the balance between technical and creative career paths: "I would not change anything from my year but it has allowed me to see that the IT industry is not one I could now see myself developing a career within... I hope to set up my own company incorporating a business built on creativity."

Finally, students also displayed agency in the professional environment by developing transferable skills in communication and personal management. These so-called 'soft skills' are essential and are best developed through interaction with colleagues and clients in the process of engaging in professional action. Students gained a variety of communication skills including verbal and nonverbal; face-to-face, phone or email; formal written reports and public speaking presentations. For many, the opportunity to gain confidence in communication was a huge achievement: "I had to give a 20-minute presentation in an auditorium in front of around 40 people including professors and researchers from outside the university. I have never been a good public speaker so of course I was nervous at first, but I am much more confident now and no longer have a fear of speaking in public." Another critical transferable skill was learning to personally manage priorities, including time, tasks, projects, and resources. One student found that meeting deadlines and completing target tasks had clear implications. If tasks were not completed on time, other aspects of the work environment could not function properly: "To make sure that I had everything done I drew up spreadsheets and tick lists to break up my week and keep on track of what had to be done and when. My time management improved." All of these transferable skills demonstrate that students can develop their own sense of personal agency and a repertoire of communication and self-management strategies for engaging effectively in the professional environment.



## Key Steps in Learning to be Professional

The stories of learning to be professional contained within them concrete advice and also many implicit lessons. The next section attempts to draw out some practical guidance for future placement students on what learning to be professional through the placement experience means.

## ***How to find a placement***

Finding a placement that will provide an appropriate level of opportunity and career relevant experience is the first challenge and opportunity for exercising personal agency. The top resources that students credited for helping to find a placement were their department's internal contacts and the University's Professional Training intranet site. Some departments offered databases with job descriptions, roles and salaries; prior connections with professional organisations; or useful presentations from potential employers. Most students utilised job pathways created by prior placement students. However one student

desired to live in her hometown where no prior placements existed in her chosen field, so she persevered with local contacts to create a new position. Another student knew she wanted a non-traditional placement, so her tutor helped find a suitable placement with a parliamentary lobbyist group: "I advise students looking for a placement not to take the easy or standard option. Look for something that you want to do, that you can really get your teeth into, even if it is different to your peers".



Beyond the process of searching for a placement, students offered practical advice on how to navigate the application process. "My top tips when applying for placement are to start early in terms of thinking about the field you would like to go into and why, and how this fits in with your wider career goals; be prepared in terms of the application processes; and apply for more than one company." The application process may include online applications and tests, an assessment day, group activities, or one-to-one interviews. During the interview, "the best way to approach each question is to apply a simple three-part structure based on Situation,

Action and Result. Once you break the questions down in this way it becomes much easier to answer them and your answers will be much more structured and comprehensive. Like with anything, practice is the key." Persistence is also very important. Few students find and secure their placement at the first attempt. Many make dozens of applications. Framing the application in ways that are appealing to the employer is one essential part of learning to be professional.

## ***Impact upon future career path***

The placement experience can provide valuable insight toward future career paths - regardless of whether that means reaffirming a prior career desire or completely changing in a new direction. Both are completely valid outcomes. For students who reaffirmed their intended career, the placement experience helped to clarify the next steps to take professionally: "From initially feeling very apprehensive and unsure about my placement and my career choice, at the end I am now much more excited and focused about the future... I now have a greater understanding of how to progress to the next stage of my life. For me this professional work placement has been integral in introducing an area of the dance industry for which I am now passionate and intent to succeed in." Some students received job offers to return upon completion of their degrees. Other students gained valuable early insight to completely change their previous career goals. "I was adamant before my

placement year that I wanted to work in the media. However, after experiencing four months of working for a production company, I have changed my mind completely. I found the industry highly stressful and the hours were extremely long. I could see how the job completely takes over your life." Even though some students may choose to change vocational direction, the skills gained from the placement experience were still valuable for background knowledge or for pointing toward new aspirations, such as setting up a private business built on creativity.

### ***Practical advice before you begin***

Some tips for maximising your professional development:

- ◇ Network! "I literally spoke to as many people as possible at all levels and all departments of the organisation."
- ◇ "Clearly define your role within the workplace at the start of the placement."
- ◇ "Make sure that a major project will be given in order to have the opportunity to show abilities and skills and have something to talk about when reviewing the experience."
- ◇ Budget ahead, especially if your placement is unpaid or you are working in London.
- ◇ "I would encourage students to do their placements overseas, because travelling and living abroad really opens your mind and makes you more aware and respectful of other cultures."

Beyond these practical tips, students also offered motivation and encouragement to make the most of the experience:

- ◇ "Go in with an open mind. Be optimistic; be positive about all experiences and embrace the opportunity to learn as much as you can."
- ◇ "You will get as much out of it as you put in. I can't emphasise just how true this is."
- ◇ "Approach the year with an enthusiastic, pro-active attitude and not only learn more about the practical application of your degree to 'the real world', but discover more about yourself."
- ◇ "Enjoy the whole experience and although you may face challenges, remember that these challenges make us better. Go forth and prosper on the placement; the end result is near guaranteed to be amazing if it was anything like mine. Good luck!"

