

Field Report Research Internship at ZHAW

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I remember stepping into the School of Health Professions on 3rd May 2016 the same way I remember my first day of entering university: excited, nervous, but out of place, as if I didn't belong. From where I'm from, people don't often get the opportunity to intern in Switzerland which is one of the most expensive countries in the world. Moreover, to intern at the prestigious university in Winterthur, the Zurich University of Applied Sciences – that's actually what drew me to applying for an internship with the university: the opportunity to work and learn from an international organization in Europe.

I was fortunate because I went to the school on the first day escorted by supervisor, Prof. Samuel van den Bergh, who was the visiting professor at my university in Malaysia.

Ever since he picked me from the Zurich airport, he had been helping me in many ways during my stay in Winterthur. As soon as I entered the Institute of Nursing office, I was greeted by warm-hearted Susan Schärli, who was my second supervisor. Her bubbling personality made my worries went away. I appreciated that!

From the very first day I was with the School of Health Professions, everyone warmly welcomed me as a member of the team and genuinely expected me to make a contribution. My internship project was to develop 25 intercultural critical incidents that will be used to train students in their cognitive and affective development in order that they become more proficient in bridging cultural differences in the future. The opportunity to think carefully and analytically about a critical situation promotes cross-cultural awareness and accelerates teaching and learning. As such, critical incidents are an



important strategy that can be used to highlight differences and potential intercultural misunderstandings as well as to show alternative ways in bridging these differences.

Internship Project: 25 Critical Incidents (3 May – 7 July 2016)

After a detailed discussion with my supervisors, I hit the ground running, starting to work on my project. I was handed with some reading materials and a collection of 60 critical incidents which were written by ZHAW health care students who had attended the course “Challenges in Inter-Professional Health Care and Cooperation”. I was asked to review the critical incidents with relevant information by contacting the students and health professionals. In addition, I conducted 7 semi-structure interviews with health professionals. To make the critical incidents more relevant, the lecturers who involved in intercultural training in the School of Health Professions, ZHAW were asked to contribute some critical incidents. The critical incidents were then revised and adapted into the requirements of this study.

Conducting interviews with the health professionals was enjoyable for me as it did make me use all the techniques I learned at my institute in Malaysia, i.e. Human Resources Development when I interviewed an entrepreneur. Though conducting interviews with Europeans was quite different, I was happy that I had the opportunity to use all of my theoretical knowledge and applied it to real-life situations.



Rorschach Hospital, where I conducted some interviews

Through experience and observation another valuable lesson I learned while working at ZHAW was the work culture: punctuality is highly valued. Although a planning process is often very time consuming, it is compulsory. Once planning is done, a project will move very quickly and deadlines are expected to be honoured.

Nearing the end of my internship, I had the opportunity to have a floor by myself with supports from my two supervisors to present some critical incidents that I produced. I also had the honour to conduct a mock training session among the professionals (mostly from the School of Health Professions) to obtain feedback on the critical incidents.

The lessons I learned through this presentation were that: firstly, publicity has to be scheduled well in advance with comprehensive coverage of mass media. Secondly, appropriate steps should be taken in preparing an agenda and it is advisable to circulate agendas in advance to ensure everyone is informed and prepared if possible. Ensure that the facilities that are required for the presentation are available and ready to use. Finally, the presentation should be well prepared, comprehensive, clear, well written, and informative and should be presented in a formal, rational, professional manner – appealing always to the intellect of professionals.

Strengths and weaknesses of my internship

A Cross-Cultural Experience

The internship with the ZHAW was definitely a cross-cultural experience for me. This valuable experience fits perfectly with the Asia-Europe Institute's philosophy of enhancing Asia-Europe relations and its aims to develop better understanding of cultures, histories, politics, institutions, economics, business and legal practices of both regions.

Personally, this internship was a “hands-on, mind-on” learning for me to recognize, respect and reconcile cultural differences between the East and the West.

Enhance Cognitive Thinking and Creativity

My supervisors gave all the freedom and flexibility to carry out the internship project. They were very open and happy for me to contribute as much as I wanted to, and were open to any suggestions and ideas. This instantly made me feel comfortable and definitely made me feel as though I was part of the team. Their coaching style made me to think cognitively and creatively. They made me think harder or in a different way about something. They also challenged me in some way that I learned a new skill, expanded an old one, placed me outside my usual “comfort zone”, expanded my world view.

In summary, there are many reasons to consider interning at the School of Health Professions, but perhaps none is more worthwhile than being a part of something bigger than yourself. The important work done here – helping to provide access to a high quality education, and thus, building opportunity – changes lives. It has certainly changed mine.

A Cheesy Grin!!!

After a month of my internship, I was overwhelmed by the work and the responsibilities that were placed on me. The last month was really messy for me as I was struggling meeting the deadline; most likely caused by lack of preparation and my weak foundation in the cultural theories. However, with the help of my supervisors, who have had years of experience in the intercultural training, I was able to pull through those weeks. I felt more confident and supported as I knew my work would be double checked and any uncertainties were explained. By observing and learning from them, I managed to pick up tips and learned different types of skills. These valuable skills ranging from understanding and incorporating many different types of cultural dimensions in the critical incidents to reconciling cultural differences.

Both my supervisors took an active interest in my learning and talked about my struggles regularly, not because they felt obligated, but because they truly cared. Their dedication to their jobs and their fellow colleagues are precious memories I will never forget. In short, with their help the messy crisis finally turned to be a cheesy grin. As pungent as the smell of the Swiss cheese, that's how strong their values impacted my life. Thank you very much Prof. Samuel and Susan Schärli.

I cannot identify any weakness of the organization that I was attached to but I would like to share some weaknesses or limitations that a new intern should overcome for better contribution at ZHAW. Hopefully, these serve as tips for the future interns.

Refuse to be out of Comfort Zone

It would have been helpful if I had been able to step out of my comfort zone and adapt to the Swiss culture as early as I started my internship. I learned that Swiss are known to be more task-oriented compared to Malaysians and the internship project is expected to be meticulously planned and scheduled. It is also to be carried out accordingly. I noted that time is managed more carefully in Switzerland than Malaysia. Appointments are precisely planned and it is expected that times which are set are adhered to. I was expected to be punctual as it is a matter of good manners. Studying about Swiss culture is a good thing to do before starting the internship. I encourage new interns to step out from the comfort zone for there is a lot to explore in Switzerland – the people, food, culture and of course the Alps. I had a good laugh of cultural misconducts that I made. But it is totally fine as there will be some good people to help you around.

Nested with Confusions

I was shocked by living and working in a total new environment and culture. Doubts and confusions started to nest in my mind. Then, I started to make assumptions. Thanks to my supervisors who noticed my anxieties and invited me to share. I felt relieved after sharing my uncertainty and enquiring of what I did not understand about the internship project. I would strongly encourage new interns to ask if they do not understand. The supervisors will make it clear what is expected of the interns and are accessible to answer their questions. I learned that most Swiss people incline to communicate directly and explicitly. They may appear unfriendly but they do not mean so. Also, they do not easily recognise and respond to verbal subtleties such as indirect hints, messages 'between the lines' and many non-verbal signals. They can therefore often miss the decisive content of an interaction. I think it would have saved me from lots of stress and anxieties if I had learned the Swiss style of communication earlier. I would advise new interns to go with an open mind and a teachable heart for there is a lot of valuable knowledge to take home. Clear the nest of confusions, it will be filled with wonderful adventures and knowledge.

Don't get Cold Feet and Back Out

Finally, do not get cold feet and back out! I was about to give up when I was unable to solve the problems pertaining to my project. I was nervous as the deadline was nearing. I

recognised that I would have been able to overcome all my fear and uncertainties by getting physically, academically, mentally and emotionally prepared!!! As my internship project related to intercultural, I would have contributed better if I had got the cultural theories and framework models at my fingertips before the internship. Preparations definitely would have saved me from getting cold feet, headache and sleepless nights. Thanks to my supervisors that they had helped me to overcome these difficulties. So, be prepared to avoid getting cold feet! Get help, persevere on and do not back out are the keys to a successful internship!

Conclusion

Overall, my work experience at the ZHAW was positive. I was very happy with the amount of things I have learned and experienced in 2 months of being an intern with the School of Health Professions.

The ZHAW is definitely a recommended internship organization for future AEI students. The organization is organized and well-run. People were respectful of each other. The staff welcomed me and made me feel part of the group. My supervisors were encouraging and positive. They gave me significant responsibility and the right amount as well as right kind of feedback.

The internship project, meaningful as it was, was only a small part of what made my experience so special. Everyone I met from the ZHAW helped me grow, both as an intern and a person.



From left to right: my colleague (Elisabeth), me, Susan (my supervisor), Prof. Sam (my supervisor cum visiting professor)