

Cultural issues

Everyone has to make some adjustment to work, whether they talk about it or not. If you are from a different cultural background, this adjustment might be more obvious and deliberate than someone from the same background as the placement business. How individuals adjust is different for each person, but the information below includes tips and techniques which international students from the PPA project had used in their workplaces. We hope these will be useful for you too, but this is not an exhaustive list, and you may choose a different way of managing adjustment for yourself.

Placement students come from all kinds of backgrounds. You may be:

- an international student with no work experience;
- an international student with work experience in a different culture; or
- a home student with no work experience.

All these students may have difficulty with the 'work culture' on placement. As they are already students, they have some experience of the culture in general, but work culture is often different. As a student, your University working environment is much more flexible than your placement will be. There may be rules around dress code and appearance at the placement. There will be expectations about the way you behave towards clients and colleagues. Missing a University lecture might not be problematic (depending on the course you are studying), but being persistently late to work or not turning up for a shift might have serious implications for your job. If your placement is graded, your work may be under close scrutiny, and you will probably feel under pressure to do well. You may find there is less support at the workplace than at the University, especially if you are a disabled student. Depending on the length of your placement, you may feel more like a 'temp' than a regular worker, and have less time to settle in and get to know the culture of the organisation.

The good news is that while this may be your first placement, you are unlikely to be the first placement student the provider has had. While they expect you to do your best, they are likely to be realistic about what you can achieve, and be used to working with students. You are there to learn, and they expect you to take a few days to get to know the business and get up to speed. There will be a placement mentor allocated to you,

who is your contact at the placement for any queries you may have, and who your University supervisor can check in with to see how the placement is going.

For NHS placements, your supervisor may visit you on placement to assess for themselves how the placement is going, and whether you need any support. For disabled students, there may be continuing support available during your placement – you should speak to your University's disability support office about this.

In addition to work culture, if you speak English as an additional language, this can be a challenge itself. You may have difficulty being understood in a workplace, and understanding what is being asked of you. Workplace language will be different from academic language, and the placement may require you to speak more than you do in University classes. Work language, or 'jargon', can be difficult for even native English speakers to get used to. Work terminology will be used differently and there may be local 'shorthand' to describe situations which will have to be picked up on the job. If you do not understand something, you can always ask someone to explain it.

Within the workplace, most people will talk using the proper terms, but in social conversation, colloquial or 'slang' terms may be used. If colleagues are having a chat during break times or social activities, they may use different words for the same thing, which can be difficult to understand. 'Text speak' is another area of confusion, with its own language. Most people will explain things if needed, but don't feel under pressure to understand everything on the first day! As long as you understand the work you are asked to do, the rest will follow in time.

Cultural values, attitudes and beliefs

As a placement student, you may go into a work place which operates on very different values, attitudes or beliefs to your own. One of our students was a teacher in an international school, where a new colleague with more relaxed expectations of children's behaviour caused some conflict in the workplace. Even with several colleagues from the same cultural background, there will be different approaches and priorities to work, and some negotiation is often helpful.

Ultimately, as a new placement student, the workplace has its own requirements for the job, and any worker must adjust to the organisation where possible. Being new, your role is to fit into the firm, and you might need to modify your behaviour or dress to fit workplace expectations. If you come from a different culture, but this does not affect your ability to work within the organisation's expectations (e.g. working hours, shift patterns), then there is no need to make any adjustments.

It is expected that there should be respect for others in any workplace. This means you have to treat everyone there with respect, but also that you should be respected by them.

When things go wrong

When a problem comes up in the workplace, how should you deal with it? The students in our project felt that first you should talk to colleagues about why they might do things one way and you another, listen to each other's viewpoints and feelings, and discuss the issues. This can lead to colleagues understanding each other, the issue being resolved, and a better working relationship. You can then find out whether the problem was due to the organisation or the people.

Organisation

Workplaces might have very different needs or requirements from staff, due to the nature of the work. For example, working in the NHS, there is a cultural expectation that employees will ignore their own needs and prioritise the needs of their patients. If you are training to work in an environment like this, you need to be aware of any work culture specific to the organisation.

If you find it very difficult to adjust to the organisation, you might need to consider whether this is the right placement for you. Different organisations may have more (or less) flexibility around working routines and structures, including dress code/uniform/jewellery restrictions. Businesses with fewer resources may find it harder to make adjustments, and might be more demanding of their workers. Most placements will expect computer skills, but some may work more with printed materials, and others with clients. Put time into researching your placement area, check online to make sure you know what is expected before you apply. Check with your University if there is a site for student feedback, where you can read comments from previous placement students.

People

If you are having difficulty with people in the workplace, you might want to talk to them about this. If they are finding it difficult to accept your beliefs or your actions at work, ask them why, and listen to what they tell you. You then have to decide what you will do about this. If the problem relates to a cultural issue which could be altered (for example, clothing) and there is a clear reason why this is an issue (for example, health and safety; workplace culture; client's wishes), then you may decide to alter your behaviour. There are many ways in which you can get around some issues (bringing your own food to work), so be adaptable if you can. Ask yourself how much you are prepared to compromise on, and work creatively. If the issue relates to your religious practices, it might be more difficult to resolve. If you can't see a way around an issue, consider asking other people for advice – colleagues, friends outside work, or other people from your cultural background or faith, who might have dealt with similar issues.

Not everyone in a workplace will get on well, and while you can influence them, your colleagues might not get on with you. What is the role of that person in your workplace (manager, colleague, customer, patient)? Some people it might be crucial to get on with,

and others less so. If the interpersonal problem does not affect your work, then if the situation cannot be resolved, it might be best to try and ignore their behaviour and continue to be polite, in order to complete the placement successfully.

This will be harder for some people than others to achieve successfully, and you may need support from friends. If the situation is interfering with your work, you may need to speak to your University placement supervisor and/or your placement tutor for advice.

If things continue or get worse, there is legislation to prevent you from being bullied in the workplace, and each organisation must have workplace policies and guidance on this. It is strongly recommended you speak to your University supervisor if you notice your work is suffering, and before taking any official action. As your placement may be assessed, the situation is more complicated, and your placement supervisor is there to support you with issues like this. You can also speak to your Student Union, and any workplace union you may join, for information on tackling bullying at work.

Keeping open communication is vital, in order for you to understand other people's needs and feelings, and for them to understand you also. Whether the difficulty at work is due to communication, language issues, or culture, while it is hard to do so, keep trying to maintain good relationships and keep talking to people at work.

Getting to know people better, and becoming familiar with terms and phrases used at work, will help you feel more comfortable with the workplace. It will also give your colleagues a chance to get to know you better, and if the better they know you, the more likely they are to be helpful and supportive.

We hope this has given you a chance to think carefully about workplace culture, and how conflict can be addressed and dealt with successfully. There are many sources of advice on success in the workplace, including the internet, the University library, and your Careers centre.