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Work experience should be a job requirement for academics

Teaching would improve if all scholars were required to undertake regular secondments in industry, says Cecilia Chan

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By [Cecilia Chan \(/author/cecilia-chan\)](#)



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As head of professional development at a research-intensive university in Hong Kong, it is part of my job to prepare professors as well as possible to, in turn, prepare their students for the future.

One widely discussed problem is that, in the midst of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution – the age of robots and artificial intelligence – it is unclear what jobs (or, by extension, academic disciplines) will even exist 10 years from now. An article that appeared a couple of years ago in *Times Higher Education* (“Future perfect (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/what-will-universities-look-like-in-2030-future-perfect>)”, Features, December 24 2015) asked a number of senior professors for their thoughts on what universities will be like in 2030. One of the more far-fetched but still conceivable speculations foresaw a future in which all lecturers will be replaced by AI. Yet such scenarios are not remotely on most academics’ radars.



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At a recent workshop on innovative pedagogy, for instance, I showed an audience of professors a video of Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg explaining how he built his latest gadget, Jarvis, to run his own house (based on the fictional AI with the same name from Marvel's *Iron Man*). The professors were impressed; some of them had not even realised that technologies this advanced already existed.

Students, of course, are much more up to date with technology. That reason alone is enough to do all that we can to make sure that academics keep up with them and take every opportunity to use technology to teach in a way that will resonate with Generation Z and its even younger successors.

But the disconnect between some academics and the real world runs deeper than this. Currently, many universities in Hong Kong are introducing compulsory teaching and learning programmes that teachers must complete before their contract is renewed. This is all well and good but the problem is that, while such programmes might improve pedagogical technique, they do nothing to ensure that academics possess the professional skills that students need to learn.

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Research collaborations exist between industry and academia, of course, particularly for top-ranking professors whose research is patentable. But it is much rarer for academics to seek actual work experience, whereby they gain hands-on knowledge of the modern workplace and both the specific competencies and generic skills that employers in their sectors are currently demanding. Many studies have shown that, in this fast-changing world, it is those non-disciplinary skills that employers seek above all in their graduate recruits; it is essential for us to ensure that teachers are as capable and well-rounded as we intend our students to be.

The importance of experiential learning opportunities for students has been widely accepted, particularly for their development of generic skills. Hence, at many universities, some form of internship is a compulsory, credit-based component of undergraduate programmes. But, in my view, regular work experience should also be a compulsory part of professional development for academics: even those humanities academics whose discipline does not map on to particular professional sectors very closely.

Too many academics have spent most, if not all, their professional lives within universities. The need for students to benefit from deep professional experience has been recognised by senior management via the recruitment of “professors of practice”, who do not come from a research-intensive background but are experienced and distinguished practitioners. This is good but I do not think it is enough. I would go so far as to suggest that, as part of the recruitment process, all potential professors should be required to undergo a year-long internship before they begin teaching. And all academics should be required to return to work in industry every three to five years as part of their professional development and career advancement.

Of course, higher education is not all about career advancement: it is also about learning the life skills and attitudes that allow students to become good citizens. But an academic workforce that is up to date with the latest technology, pedagogy and professional practice is the very least we need to ensure that the latest generation of students are as ready and able as they can be to find their professional niche, alongside the robots.

Cecilia K. Y. Chan is head of professional development and an associate professor in the Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning at the University of Hong Kong (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-hong-kong>).

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