

A COMMITMENT TO RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Wawasan Open University (WOU) is focused on improving its visibility and profile in the area of Research & Development



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EDITOR'S NOTE

"The pain you feel today is the strength you feel tomorrow. For every challenge encountered, there is opportunity for growth." ~ Anon

Challenges propel us to reinvent ourselves and thrive. In this regard, WOU has turned to its strengths in open distance learning (ODL) to ensure that its students are engaged and motivated in their study path, even during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. We have accomplished this efficiently through various online channels.

The University remains steadfastly focused on delivering excellent teaching and learning to equip students and the workforce with marketable skills. It ascertains that what is taught is up-to-date and relevant, keeping abreast with current developments and innovation happening locally and globally. This remains its core function and mission.

In the same light, WOU places equal importance on R&D and innovation. Keeping this in mind, the University has pumped its research arm, the Centre for Research and Innovation (CeRI), with funds to give new life and expedite the expansion of research works among the faculty and staff. There has been active collaboration not only in teaching and learning, but also in promoting the research agenda of the University.

The management, through CeRI, plans to enhance the reputation of the institution and its faculty through the undertaking of specific research projects. The aim is to improve WOU's capability in research and innovation, with a focus on flexible ODL systems and methodologies, since this will bring the added benefit of attracting students and partnerships.

As an educational provider, the University continues to hold informative webinars and online talks to disseminate knowledge and connect with students and the community at large. The topics discussed are meant to equip them for the challenges of the post-pandemic era and keep them motivated to pursue gainful employment and entrepreneurial growth.

No matter the ongoing concerns, WOU has not neglected to lend support for worthy causes as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility. Through participation in a virtual celebration to mark International Women's Day, the University joined the call against gender stereotyping and discrimination.

As members of society, all of us shoulder a shared responsibility to ensure that our future generations have a balanced view of gender and their roles.

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BACHELOR IN SOFTWARE ENGINEERING FOR SKILLS IN AN ARRAY OF SYSTEMS

WOU's new Bachelor in Software Engineering (Honours) (Application Development) [BDSE] programme, to be offered later this year, is geared to help students specialise in programming and its latest related technologies. It can be pursued through on-campus and flexible distance learning.

Graduates will master the required knowledge and technical skills in software development. The key learning aspects include how to design, develop and modify a wide range of software systems.

Students must complete the 120-credit programme comprising 5 MPU courses, 21 core subjects, 5 electives, 4 free modules, a final-year project and an industrial training placement.

Among the core courses are: Front-End Web Development; UI (User Interface) Frameworks; Web Development Using Platforms; Application Development & Processes; Agile Apps Development; Data Communication & Networking; and Software Development Models.

The exciting electives offered include Computational

Logic, Data Structures and Algorithms, R Programming, Machine Learning, Deep Learning, and Data and AI Essentials.

A graduate of the programme may work as a Software Engineer/Developer, Software/Analyst Programmer, Software/System Administrator, Software Analyst/Architect, Software Manager, IT Consultant or Research Scientist, or become an entrepreneur.

For regular entry, candidates must pass English and Mathematics at SPM/UEC Senior Middle III and possess either of the following: Grade C in at least 2 subjects/2 principals in STPM/HSC/A-Level; or 5 Grade Bs in UEC Senior Middle III.

Candidates with a recognised Diploma/Advanced Diploma or Foundation/Matriculation (minimum CGPA 2.00) qualification from other private and public universities in Malaysia, or equivalent qualifications, can enrol via regular entry as well. Interested learners who are at least 21-years-old and have relevant work experience may apply through APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning).

CLARION CALL TO CHALLENGE GENDER STEREOTYPING ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

WOU recently marked International Women's Day sporting the theme 'Choose to Challenge' with a virtual get-together to generate awareness on gender stereotyping and encourage gender equality. The event was organised by WOU'S Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS) and Penang Women's Development Corporation (PWDC) on 14 March 2021.

In her officiating speech, WOU Chief Executive and Vice Chancellor Prof Dr Lily Chan said women still do not enjoy a level playing field because of the "prevalent culture and mindset". She cited statistics that Malaysia has only 33 women parliamentarians out of the 222 in the Lower House, and only 18 of the 43 highest positions in the federal government are filled by women.

PWDC chief executive officer Ong Bee Leng, in her talk on *Gender Stereotyping*, said that mental conditioning occurs from young due to exposure to certain colours of clothes, toys, story books and what the child hears. Gender stereotyping can cause unconscious bias and lead women to often shoulder the double burden of work and home.

"Let us break the gender stereotype. Give equal opportunities for girls and boys to be what they want to be," she urged. "Children see parents as role models. Whatever parents do, they will amplify and do to future generations.

To help them have a more balanced view, show them shared responsibilities."

Ong emphasised that incidences of domestic violence, rape and other crimes arise from men seeking to have power over women. Local statistics still reflect the disparity of women's participation in the economy/workforce, politics and ministerial positions.

She called for women's equal access to resources and opportunities, and for collective action to create a gender-inclusive environment.



▲ United against gender stereotyping.

DRIVING ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A CAREER AMONG SOUTHEAST ASIA'S YOUNG

Unbeknownst to many, Southeast Asia is a fertile ground for startup businesses that can fuel the economies of the region, especially through job creation. The region is seeing increasing urbanisation, rising consumer incomes, demand for convenience and supportive government policies.

WOU Chief Executive and Vice Chancellor Prof Dr Lily Chan shared that Southeast Asia is in fact home to the world's third largest market. More than half of the people are Internet users, having access to digital technology. The region also has a young population, with median age of 30 years.

She stressed that entrepreneurship is an important driver of economic growth and innovation in any country. "An entrepreneur has lots of opportunities for partnership and collaborations," Prof Chan said at an online talk on *Promoting Entrepreneurship as a Career Option for Young Graduates* on 13 January 2021. The event was organised by the School of Agility, Grit and Entrepreneurship (SAGE), a Manila-based EduTech company.

"Innovation and entrepreneurial hubs are needed for job creation, talent retention, the growth of new industries and for solving complex issues, all of which contribute to economic development."

In this light, she urged institutions of higher learning to provide the relevant educational curriculum, tools and opportunities to nurture future entrepreneurs. There is increased emphasis on entrepreneurship as a career choice at universities now, she stressed.

Prof Chan highlighted three important components for an ecosystem that facilitates innovation and entrepreneurship. In doing so she shared her previous experience at the National University of Singapore (NUS) where, as Chief Executive Officer of NUS Enterprise, she created a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem to nurture hundreds of startup companies.

She revealed her vision to rework the NUS formula for Penang, with talent supplied by WOU's new School of Digital Technology (DiGiT) located within George Town's heritage site.

The first component is having a pipeline of entrepreneurial talent. Prof Chan had helped to achieve this through the NUS Overseas Colleges (NOC) project, which places students in full-time internships at global entrepreneurial hubs. They pursue entrepreneurial classes at prestigious partner universities for six months to a year. There are currently over 3,000 alumni and 12 NOC colleges around the world.

The second is creating a necessary environment. At NUS this was done by promoting an entrepreneurial culture



▲ Prof Chan spoke on the need to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

on campus through innovative co-working spaces and programmes, mentorship, resources and support for returning NOC students.

It is important for the government to provide infrastructure for an ecosystem that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship, Prof Chan noted. "The corporate sector also needs to be involved because young startup companies are providing interesting technologies which the corporations can partner in, instead of inventing by themselves. And the startups would need access to venture capital."

She also recounted how NUS Enterprise created a conducive environment to turn Block 71 in Singapore into a startup/entrepreneurial hub, becoming home to hundreds of tech-related start-ups, venture capitalists and incubators.

The third component features fostering a community. Such an initiative was mooted under the NOC to draw other faculties, senior management and students to be supportive of the programme. An entrepreneurial-themed residence hall was set up for NOC students/alumni to gather and exchange ideas, while outreach efforts were undertaken in the forms of informal chats, a community newsletter, hackathons and networking events.

ADAPTING TO FUTURE TRENDS IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The construction industry is one of the most vital contributors to society and the economy. However, it is not without its own share of challenges worldwide, especially in the next few years.

Those interested in pursuing a professional career in construction must therefore be amply equipped and able to deal with not only the future trends, but also the issues that the industry will confront.

According to industry expert Dr Amin Akhavan Tabassi, two current challenges are turning existing stock of buildings into sustainable, energy-efficient buildings, and also strengthening and refitting the many aged infrastructure projects.

Dr Tabassi, who is Senior Lecturer of Project Management at the Business School of Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), United Kingdom, was speaking at an online talk on *Career Advancement in the Construction Industry*. The event was organised by WOU's School of Science & Technology (SST) and the Penang Regional Centre (PGRC) on 23 January 2021.

Dr Tabassi stressed that the global construction industry is predicted to grow by over 70% by 2025 and has benefited from increasing rural-urban migration that has created a demand for affordable housing.

The industry will witness a future trend of refurbishing old buildings, since 70% to 90% of all buildings that need to be provided in the next 10 or 20 years already exist. "In the UK, over 80% of the 2025 building stock has already been built," he said. "In Australia, over 80% of the 2020 office building stock has been built, with the average age of Australia's office stock exceeding 27 years. In Kuala Lumpur, the existing stock of office buildings are 85% of that required."

Providing an overview, Dr Tabassi listed four key areas that will impact the construction industry: market and customers; sustainability and resilience; society and workforce; and politics and regulations.

He elaborated first on the high market demand for residential and new infrastructure projects in developing countries. He said that projects in the future would be bigger and more complex, like the undersea tunnel project in China. There is also a need to address ageing infrastructure - such as in the case in Germany where one in three railway bridges are over a hundred years old.

On sustainability and resilience, he highlighted the problems of scarcity of raw materials, solid waste production, resilience of buildings against disasters and gas emissions. All these can lead to global warming, resource depletion, ozone depletion, reduction of biodiversity as well as water, air and land pollution.

As for society and workforce, he said the industry must confront issues of urbanisation and housing crisis, talent and ageing workforce, community opposition to projects, and politicisation of construction decisions. In the area of politics and regulations, the factors affecting the industry include complexity in regulatory requirements, slowness in permit and approval process, and corruption.

Dr Tabassi called for industry transformation in line with IR 4.0 and the adoption of best practices - such as use of semi-automated construction equipment, new construction technologies like 3D printing, digital technologies and big data, innovative construction models, enhanced management of sub-contractors and suppliers, rigorous project monitoring, sustainable products, continuous training and knowledge management, and coordinated communication with civil society.

He felt that the industry is lagging in the use of technology to facilitate operations and the management of project activities.



▲ Dr Tabassi offered a glimpse into the future state of the construction industry.

'LIVE' ROBOTIC ARM PROJECT SET TO BENEFIT INDUSTRIES AND ACADEMIA



▲ Dr Teoh heads the project.

Everyone fancies robots – whether they appear on movie screens or in real-life. Besides being entertaining and technologically exciting, they make complicated, repetitive tasks in the real world much lighter and easier.

For industries, robotics or automation offers convenience and efficiency that bring about improved productivity in the working environment. Most

industrial robots are intended for specific tasks, and this involves programming or customisation via hard coding.

Recently, a project undertaken with a RM30,000 grant from WOU's Centre for Research and Innovation (CeRI) has come up with a unique function – to use the human hand to control the movements of a robotic arm and its fingers, in order to perform certain tasks without using hard coding.

The gloved robotic hand bears a wireless Bluetooth control and mobile phone app with which it performs hand movements and multiple tasks. The project, which commenced on 1 January 2018 and is expected to finish by June 2021, can serve as a base for future projects, especially on robotic programming.

The project is headed by WOU's School of Science & Technology (SST) Deputy Dean (Industry & Outreach) Dr Teoh Ping Chow who has collaborated with academics from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, TAR University College and the Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC). It is supported by several WOU final-year mechatronics students.

RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

In recent years, a new breed of robotic arms known as the Collaborative Robot (cobot) has been introduced to industries. Smaller and slower compared to the traditional industry robot, the cobot is also less powerful and repeatable as a machine. However, it costs less and is safer to be used. It also fills a niche in manufacturing to execute tasks as instructed by humans and better operates alongside manual workers.

Most cobots designed in the market normally have their robotic hands customised by third-party vendors based on the users' requirements.

This project aims to complement the development of the cobot by exploring the application of a robotic hand that can perform multiple tasks, similar to a human hand. The robotic fingers and arms become freely moveable. A micro-controller enables the robotic fingers to follow the hand movements of a human wearing a remote-controlled glove.

Dr Teoh Ping Chow shares some insights on this technology with WawasanLink.

Q: What is the purpose of your research?

Dr Teoh: This project intends to explore the various functionalities of a robotic hand mounted on an articulated robot, in order to perform various tasks that mimic the finger movements of a person who wears the glove.

We selected the robotic hand as it can be used for demonstration and marketing purposes to promote our mechatronics programme. It can also be developed into a tool for ODLE (open distance learning) education in the future – for example to remotely control the robotic hand through the Internet to perform tasks in a remote lab.

Q: What benefits do you see arising from this project?

Dr Teoh: The robot developed may not have direct application in the industry, but it can help to inspire potential students to understand the basics of technology and appreciate the efforts of the engineers and technicians who have contributed to the development of robotic technology.

Currently, the robot can only be used in short-distance wireless control and performs very simple movements.



▲ Illustration of the project.

A VIRTUAL SIMULATOR TO PRACTISE SURVEYING ANYWHERE AT ANY TIME

Programmes like architecture, construction and engineering often involve practical outdoor field work to familiarise students with the use of modern surveying procedures and instruments, while preparing them for the reality of working on construction sites.

However, conventional surveying courses often encounter shortcomings, especially due to insufficient practical opportunities. They face, among others, limited physical-class time, site constraints, unaffordable high-quality instruments, difficulty in maintaining sensitive instruments, and extraneous circumstances like rain and pandemic.

There is a way to overcome all these. Virtual simulation offers a platform to enhance the students' experience and interest by allowing them to practise the surveying activities from anywhere at any time.

A project titled *Virtual Land Surveying Instrument for Open Distance Learning (ODL)* has recently been undertaken with a grant of nearly RM19,000 from WOU's Centre for Research and Innovation (CeRI). It involves the development of a virtual land survey simulator called SimuSurveyX to facilitate online learning for surveying courses.

The project, which commenced on 16 April 2019, is due for completion by 17 June 2021. It is led by Dora Yeap Chu Im and Muhammad Norhadri Md Hilmi of WOU, who are collaborating on it with Universiti Sains Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

The team first customises various simulation environments for performing of different surveying tasks. A questionnaire is then designed to determine students' attitudes towards the virtual surveying instrument, both before and after using it.

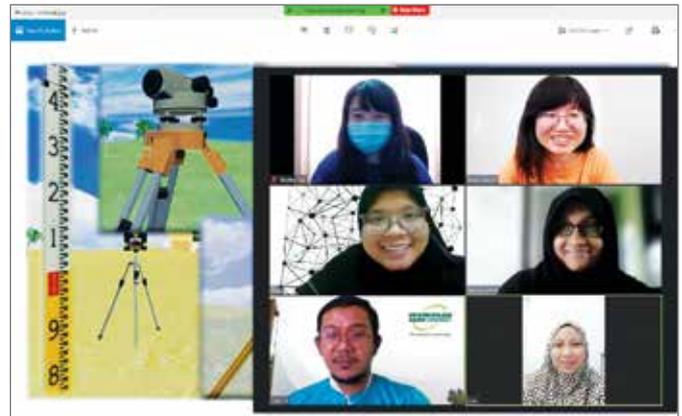
The students are given introductory training on the virtual instrument at a special session where they are also taught a surveying topic similar to the one in traditional surveying classes. This training session is immediately followed by a quiz to assess the students' learning performance.

The instructors are later interviewed for their views on the application of the virtual surveying instrument. Here is how the instrument works:

1. The student performs learning activities on the simulator while a playback feature records the session.
2. The playback recording is sent and stored in an online cloud platform.
3. The tutor/instructor manually analyses the student's learning behaviour and learning progress through the playback.

► Muhammad Norhadri.

▼ The project team and their research.



STATUS

An online training workshop on the use of the virtual instrument was conducted for tutors to familiarise them with the software. The tutors then led training workshops for students at the respective Regional Centres in September 2020. The next step is to improve on the software playback and recording features, due to a policy change by the storage provider involving a time limit for storage.

In an interview with WawasanLink, Muhammad Norhadri shed light on the background of the project.

What is the benefit of the virtual land surveying instrument?

Norhadri: Its use in a surveying course will benefit both ODL students and tutors. The student's learning will not be restricted by time, site and weather challenges. The tutors will also be able to observe and evaluate each student's progress by accessing the learning activities from the recording and playback features embedded in the simulator.

What motivated you to conduct this research?

Norhadri: Virtual simulation training has been extensively used in many other courses at renowned universities, such as the surgical/medical simulation laboratory at North Carolina University, microelectronics WebLab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, virtual physics laboratory at University of Houston, but there are relatively few in land surveying courses.

What's the next step for your research?

Norhadri: We plan to extend this virtual surveying training to a larger group of ODL students taking the surveying course for their construction programme.

PRE-EMINENCE OF RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY

WOU aspires to raise its profile in the field of research and innovation, and thereby improve its academic stature among prospective students, the community and the population at large.



◀ Prof Balakrishnan manages the University's research centre.

In days of yore, universities in general were able to subsist and even thrive by merely focusing on teaching and learning. Circumstances, however, have altered significantly today.

There are now no two ways about it. Current developments in the higher education industry demand that research is also made an integral function of any university worth its salt.

WOU, in recognising the importance of research and aspiring to expand its contributions thereto, has rebranded and revamped its research arm, the Centre for Research and Innovation (CeRI). Through the Centre's initiatives and accomplishments, the University seeks to strategically position itself as an established, forward-thinking and leading institution of higher learning.

The success of any research cannot be left to chance. There must be foresight, planning and concrete steps instituted and implemented in the right direction to bring about optimum benefits for industry, society and academia.

With robust and effectual research, WOU can apply its findings to deliver up-to-date knowledge and skills to its students. The research can also contribute towards developing the most appropriate, engaging and effective teaching and learning platforms, so as to enhance the experience of students.

Attesting to the University's commitment in making research a priority, CeRI is placed directly under the leadership of Vice Chancellor Prof Dr Lily Chan as its Chairman. The

management of CeRI's overall operations is in the able hands of Prof Dr Balakrishnan Muniandy, with his decades of experience in research, who serves as its Head.

The Centre's committee members include the Deans and at least one academic representative from each of the four Schools – School of Business & Administration (SBA), School of Science & Technology (SST), School of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences (SEHS), and School of Digital Technology (DiGiT).

DRIVING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

In the bid to promote its research agenda and improve capacity-building of WOU's faculty and staff in the field, CeRI provides grants and technical assistance for various projects. It also assists academic staff in applying for external research funding and grants, such as from the Fundamental Research Grants Scheme (FRGS) managed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), as well as grants from local industries and international bodies.

In line with this, CeRI collaborates with MOHE, public/private universities, industries, NGOs and global organisations to carry out research projects. The Centre also strives to increase the number of principal investigators and research-based publications from its faculty members.

RESEARCH THRUST AND FOCUS

CeRI encourages faculty members to undertake collaborative research projects on open distance learning (ODL) and the specialisation areas of the four Schools.

The ODL research areas may focus on:

- **ODL systems and theories** – e.g. access, equity and ethics of ODL; education delivery systems and institutions; theories and models of ODL; and research methods in ODL and knowledge transfer.
- **Management, organisation and technology** – e.g. costs and benefits; educational technology; professional development and faculty support; learner support services; and quality assurance.
- **Teaching and learning in ODL environment** – e.g. instructional design, interaction and communication in learning communities, and learner characteristics.

GREATER FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

CeRI is tasked with developing relevant infrastructure and infostructure support, while guiding faculty/staff in specific areas of research and innovation. It is also responsible for conceptualising the university's policy for R&D and innovation, and facilitating internal and external research grant applications of faculty/staff.

Prof Balakrishnan explains: "We want our faculty and staff to participate in research activities and publish, so as to share their findings with fellow colleagues locally, nationally and internationally. They are able to network when they present their research outputs in high-level global conferences and proceedings."

CeRI is progressing well in realising WOU's vision to promote greater faculty participation in research. This can be seen from the increasing frequency of faculty members applying for and obtaining research grants, including from CeRI, MOHE and international agencies.

At WOU, faculty members are encouraged to do more research in areas related to ODL, Prof Balakrishnan stressed. "We hope to have a repository of research findings related to ODL," he said. "WOU can apply the findings to help solve problems and make decisions, thus improving the quality of our teaching and learning."

The hallmark of truly responsible academia lies in being conscientious and upright. CeRI ensures and encourages its researchers to conduct their research ethically and rigorously, using appropriate effective methodologies. It is important that the findings of every research initiative are unbiased and credible.

"We aim to position WOU as an academic institution that supports and excels in research-based activities," Prof Balakrishnan said in summing up the University's challenge to shine beyond just teaching and learning.

"Participation in research projects and publication activities can enhance and improve the University's standings and position in the MyRA and SETARA ratings. This will show the university's dynamism as a knowledge and research centre, besides its teaching and learning excellence."

LIST OF A FEW RECENT PROJECTS*

The following projects, unless otherwise stated, are funded by CeRI Research Grants and are currently ongoing.

1. *Developing an Eclectic Self-Regulated Lifelong Learning Model in the Era of IR 4.0* by Dr Por Fei Ping (SEHS), in collaboration with Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sabah. FRGS grant.
2. *An Exploratory Study on Student Receptiveness to Simulation Based Learning* by Assoc Prof Dr Dewi Amat Sapuan (SBA).
3. *Development of a Digital Entrepreneurial Startup Kit for Graduates: From Ideation, Incubation, Acceleration to Expansion* by Dr Andrew Tan Kian Lam (DiGiT) in collaboration with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
4. *Factors Affecting the Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) on Consumer Online Purchase Decision: the Impact of Brand Social Media Communication Effectiveness* by Dr Lee Heng Wei (DiGiT).
5. *Trialling Novelty in Micro-Learning Design to Increase Engagement in Courses* by Dr Ooi Chia Yi (SEHS).
6. *Investigating the Current Writing Practices of Students in a Malaysian Distance Education University* by Assoc Prof Dr Thomas Chow Voon Foo (SEHS).
7. *Qualitative Analysis of the Experience of Covid-19 Pandemic of Vulnerable Populations* by Dr Chong Chew Wuei (SEHS).
8. *Overcoming Academic Procrastination through Time Management Training and Practices among Open Distance Learners & Enhancing Re-enrolment in WOU* by Sharmilah Velaichamy (Student Engagement Unit).
9. *Effect of Self-Efficacy and Learning Strategies on ODL Students' Academic Performance and Persistency Rate: A Comparison between APEL and Regular Entry Students* by Dr Tan Saw Fen (SEHS) (completed).

(*Two other projects are featured at length on pages 6 and 7.)

JOB INTERVIEW TIPS FOR STUDENTS AT VIRTUAL CAREER FAIR

Many people may not think so, but a job interview calls for a great deal of preparation. This is because such interviews present the best opportunity for applicants to stand out, show their potential and prove themselves to be the fittest persons for the relevant positions.

According to Alfred Leo, Marketing Director of GradMalaysia/ GTI Media, "first impression is important". In fact, researchers at New York University discovered that people make 11 major decisions about one another in the first 7 seconds of meeting, he stressed. He said this at a session on *Interview Tips: Dos and Don'ts* at the virtual career fair organised by WOU's School of Business & Administration (SBA) on 15 December 2020.

Among the important tips that he conveyed was not to get discouraged if you do not have all the skills advertised as long as you have the right attitude to deliver the job.

He advised applicants to be mindful of their body language, and to speak up and contribute to the discussion. "Speak normally, do not put on a foreign accent, and do not try too hard to impress as the interviewers would know."

The interviewers are not looking for perfect answers. Their aim is to gauge communication skills, evaluate confidence level and see how the candidate presents his ideas. "Employers hire for good attitude, and train for skill, since skills can be taught. They appreciate qualities like energy, humour, team spirit and self-confidence," Leo said.

However, fresh graduates still tend to stumble on standard queries like: "Tell me about yourself. What is your greatest weakness? Why do you want to work for us? How much do you want to make?"

Leo further advised: "While admitting your weakness, tell them how you plan to overcome it as this shows awareness and an initiative for self-improvement." He warned against flippantly replying that you are perfect as this shows you are self-absorbed, ignorant or arrogant.

Leo emphasised on a few dos for job interviews.

"Keep to the point. Be work-specific. Relate your quality, experience and strength to the job."



▲ Leo: The importance of preparation and making a good first impression.

"In any area of work, employers want those who are adaptable, humble and know their own weakness," he said, cautioning applicants against giving "cute" answers like "I need the money," when citing reasons for their interest in joining the company.

"Put effort into researching the company before you apply," he said. "Be prepared with the right qualifications and experience but boost it all up with a positive attitude." He suggested finding out when the company was established, where its headquarters is, how many branches it has, the accolades won in recent years, and so forth.

Leo emphasised on a few dos for job interviews. "Keep to the point. Be work-specific. Relate your quality, experience and strength to the job."

He also elaborated on the PAR (Problem-Action-Result) interview strategy. Problem represents the challenges faced; Action for methods of problem-solving; and Result for the lessons learnt or valued gained.

"When picking an example or scenario, be careful not to shame your previous company or boss," he stressed. Prompted by interviewers, applicants can also ask for clarification from the interviewers. For example, they can ask why the position is vacant, how big the team/department is, who they would report to, what their KPI would be, what the company culture is, and what benefits or promotions/opportunities they stand to have if they do well.

IMPROVING ONLINE PRESENCE FOR PROFESSIONAL AND CAREER GAINS

In today's job market, it is highly likely that employers assessing candidates for positions will search their names on the Internet or even look them up on LinkedIn at some point in the hiring process.

That is why it is important to create an appealing online presence because your "online presence matters", especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and modern digital era, said Karen Lim, marketing and events manager of GradMalaysia/GTI Media.

"Are you everywhere, participating in volunteer activities or company events? Is there another side to you than how you project yourself? What do you post or share?" she said in detailing some aspects that employers look for.

Lim was speaking at a talk on *Online Presence and LinkedIn* held in conjunction with WOU's virtual career fair organised by the School of Business & Administration (SBA) on 15 December 2020.

She urged participants to focus on improving their online presence first. "If an employer searches your name, foremost they would access your LinkedIn account and online activities you are involved in. So, manage your online activity carefully as employers may go through your social media platforms," she said.

She recommended setting up a LinkedIn profile to create a professional online presence and use that to look for jobs locally and overseas. Job seekers should also check out the employers' expectations before specifying the relevant skills and career interests under their own profiles.

Lim offered the 'ACE' strategy (Achievements - Consistency - Extra Effort) to improve online presence.

"Showcase achievements at your work, university, society etc., in your LinkedIn profile, such as organising events and so forth, to show your leadership and other qualities," she explained. Recruiters want to see what candidates have achieved more than what they have done. Hence, one should quantify one's work and university experiences.

"Are you everywhere, participating in volunteer activities or company events? Is there another side to you than how you project yourself? What do you post or share?" she said in detailing some aspects that employers look for.



▲ Job seekers should improve their online presence, said Lim.

Lim also called for consistency in a person's online presence and social media postings. Recruiters use online platforms to help screen candidates. "Make sure all information provided (online and offline) are accurate and consistent. Use the same name and email address on all job applications online and offline," she elaborated.

"You can go one step further and use the same profile picture so that recruiters can recognise you across all platforms, including WhatsApp," she added. She strongly advised against using irrelevant or trivial photos like that of cats, coffee or random items on email accounts to avoid presenting a weak impression to the employer.

On extra effort, Lim suggested using the many free tools to "up your game and make your online presence more visible". Avoid slip-ups like typos, grammar mistakes and spelling errors when applying for jobs online. Make full use of any free tools to spot and rectify such mistakes, like Canva, Word Hippo, Grammarly, VisualCV, Powtoon, YouTube and Wix.

In summing up, she said, "Showcase your achievements. Be consistent with your contact details. Remain professional on social media accounts. Have separate accounts for work and play. LinkedIn is your friend, maximise its potential. Take professional photos for work purposes."



DIGITAL BUSINESS SKILLS KEY FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Thousands of companies have closed down while many more have struggled since March 2020 when the Covid-19 virus started spreading worldwide. With physical contact being severely curtailed, business operators have been compelled to reach customers and suppliers via the ever-growing e-commerce market.

Indeed, the pandemic has accelerated a 'new normal' in the commercial landscape, making businesses undertake digital transformation to survive, said WOU's School of Digital Technology (DiGiT) Senior Lecturer Dr Lee Heng Wei.

He cited statistics that in just a month, 91% of Malaysians on average searched online for a product or service to purchase while 82% bought a product online. Even small businesses like nasi lemak stalls have been transforming their operations by joining Internet-based delivery services like Food Panda, he shared.

Dr Lee was presenting an interesting online talk on *Digital Transformation: Your Vaccine in Post Covid-19 Business Environment* on 27 December 2020. The event was organised by the Penang Regional Centre (PGRC) in collaboration with DiGiT.

"The main aim of digital transformation is to use technology to serve customers better," he said. Digital transformation, he explained, entails the use of digital technologies to create new, or modify existing, business processes, cultures and customer experiences to meet changing business and market requirements.

Dr Lee highlighted four key areas for digital transformation of businesses - process transformation, business model transformation, domain transformation and organisational transformation.

"Process transformation is how you gather data," he said, remarking that every marketing plan nowadays must be

data-based. "You collect data from data analytics, SEO (search engine optimisation), so that you can know which customer searches for which product, and which key word they use. This is vital information for your process where all is data-driven."

Business model transformation, on the other hand, is on changing the way one does business, such as getting the business online and selling online, he added.

"Domain transformation is shifting the focus of your business from one area to another more promising sector, such as moving into producing masks or gloves. This requires creative business solutions, creative problem-solving and entrepreneur-development skills," Dr Lee said.

Highlighting organisational transformation of business, he said that it would require agile management and digital human resource management. Employers want graduates with digital skills and experiences to help with the digital transformation of their businesses. Workers must therefore be able to use online analytical tools, design social media campaigns and measure business performance using digital metrics, as well as have basic SEO knowledge and experience in digital marketing and content writing/editing, he said.

Dr Lee also spoke about WOU's new Bachelor of Digital Business (Honours) programme (BDBS) which is designed to frontload job-oriented skills in the first year via an intensive on-campus learning mode during which students are mentored by industrial experts. They can then start working full-time from the second year onwards while they complete their degree through open distance learning (ODL).

Graduates of BDBS can work as digital media specialists, digital business analysts, product specialists (digital services), digital marketing executives, business development specialists and digital content specialists.

INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKING FOR POST-PANDEMIC TEACHING AND LEARNING

In light of the demand for IT-based learning in the Covid-19 period and after, educators are encouraged to benchmark themselves against the globally-recognised ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) standards.

Dr Por Fei Ping, Lecturer from the School of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences (SEHS), urged educators to improve themselves in this regard to better engage students through the various online platforms. They can use the benchmark to evaluate their own readiness for post-pandemic teaching and learning.

She said this at an online talk on *Equipping Educators for the Post-Pandemic Teaching and Learning Landscape* organised by the School in collaboration with the Penang Regional Centre (PGRC) on 19 December 2020.

She stressed that a key aspect to be guided by the ISTE standards is digital literacy. It involves evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the different tools and shortcomings of lessons, and then designing a lesson that meets the students' needs and market demands.

Dr Por cited and elaborated on seven ISTE standards - Learner, Leader, Citizen, Collaborator, Designer, Facilitator and Analyst.

Firstly, as a Learner, an educator should learn from and with others to use the potential of technology. He must set professional learning goals, build learning networks and stay current with the latest educational research, tool and pedagogy, she stated.

As a Leader, the educator must share his vision and actively shape students to achieve it. "We must lead our students to join the learning process, and support student empowerment and success," Dr Por said.

She then called on each educator to be a responsible Citizen in the online world, and not post or share postings without filtering. "We need to be responsible in the use of digital resources and educate our students to be ethical in using the digital tools," she said.

As a Collaborator, the educator exchanges ideas with colleagues and students, and discovers new digital resources towards solving problems and achieving better student-learning outcomes.

As a Designer, the educator applies instructional design principles to design innovative learning environments to accommodate different learning styles and learning needs, and create personalised lessons.

As a Facilitator, he facilitates learning with technology to achieve students' learning goals, "We need to create a learning culture where students are responsible for their own learning outcomes and are independent learners," Dr Por said.

Lastly, as an Analyst, she explained, the educator must analyse the data obtained from the formative and summative assessments to design lessons that meet students' needs, and provide timely feedback to the students and parents.

Besides digital literacy, Dr Por also spoke about digital access and digital skill. Digital access refers to access to different devices, software, tools and the Internet, while digital skill refers to the use of devices for online and offline teaching.

She encouraged educators to upskill, re-skill and cross-skill themselves, especially in times of uncertainty so that they are versatile and ready to learn new skills beyond their job scope to be multifunctional.



▲ Dr Por conducting a workshop (filepic - before the pandemic).

ADAPTING TO CHALLENGES IN THE FINANCIAL SERVICES INDUSTRY



▲ Dato' Choo urged financial institutions to embrace innovation and cater to changing customer expectations.

Faced with a rapidly transforming landscape, banks and other financial institutions are experiencing an entirely new wave of challenges. Changes in customer expectations, regulations, technology and competition make it imperative for those pursuing a career in the industry to be well equipped in order to successfully ride the existing and new scenarios.

Stressing on the importance of innovation and change management, Dato' Howard Choo, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of IBH Investment Bank Limited, said the institutions must "embrace the changing environment and constantly think creatively to address current and anticipated business needs".

It is particularly important to adapt IT for modern banking operations to meet customer expectations of convenience as well as to address competition, he said during an online talk on *Career in Financial Services and Challenges* on 21 February 2021. The event was organised by WOU's Penang Regional Centre (PGRC) and the School of Business & Administration (SBA).

Dato' Choo noted that the banking landscape is constantly evolving because of innovation, leading to more self-

banking services. This contrasts with the situation over 25 years ago when banks used to hire many SPM and STPM leavers as tellers to handle over-the-counter services. Today, the tellers' tasks are less significant due to the advent of more sophisticated ATMs and other automated services.

He highlighted the rise in digital banking and online banking services, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. "IT professionals attending to the back-end of banking services have become more in-demand in the financial services sector," he said.

Banks also need to comply with ever-changing national regulations and standards on cyber-security, and on countering money laundering and financing of terrorism. They are no longer required under regulations to set up branches in remote areas, leading to concentration of banks in urban areas.

Dato' Choo, who is also a Council Member of the Asian Institute of Chartered Bankers (AICB), said that the banking environment has also been affected due to an increasing tendency among banks to recruit graduates rather than non-graduates, due to the existence of many universities.

He reminded that when applying for work at banks, candidates should have a clear idea of which department they want to join. Among them are risk management, accounts and finance, compliance, credit/loan administration, loans recovery, IT as well as consumer, corporate and enterprise banking.

There is also a need for multi-disciplinary graduates in view of the various banking services provided. He said banks now handle a lot of loans, and thus they need talents who understand the various sectors.

"That is why banks recruit those with degrees in biology or agriculture because they lend to farming companies. For project financing, they may need people with engineering backgrounds," he said in offering examples. The different categories of focus, such as the commercial, investment or development sectors, have different requirements.

Dato' Choo urged bank employees to embrace innovation and change management, customer focus, professionalism, and honesty and integrity. "Banks should build a 'customer first' culture and deliver proactive service to exceed customer expectations," he said.

On the emergence of e-wallet, he expressed skepticism that it will replace mainstream banking, as is happening in China, since Malaysians have easy access to credit cards and saving accounts.

BREAK INFECTION CHAIN TO PREVENT WORKPLACE CLUSTERS, CAUTIONS INDUSTRIALIST

Employers must take seriously the risk of Covid-19 being introduced and spread at the workplace, and implement a complete mitigation plan to curb infections at the site.

Industrialist Dato' Dr Neoh Soon Bin stressed that companies will only help themselves and their staff by implementing appropriate and proactive measures to prevent their factories and business premises from closing due to the virus.

Dato' Neoh, who is Managing Director of Soon Soon Group of Companies and Director of Lam Wah Ee Hospital, said this at the WOU webinar titled *Covid-19 Mitigation at the Workplace* on 1 March 2021. About 350 people joined the event moderated by Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Chairman of WOU's Board of Governors.

According to statistics from the Ministry of Health, 56 of the 66 new clusters, or 85% of the total new clusters, from 19 to 25 February 2021 were from the workplace. Seeing how critical the matter is, Dato' Neoh called for a complete Covid-19 mitigation plan to break the chain of infection at the workplace.

"First set up a high-level Covid-19 task force to deal with the constant changes in regulations and the pandemic situation," he said. "Most companies relegate this task to their safety officer and/or HR department. That is a fatal mistake. It should be headed by senior management and HODs if it is to be effective."

Dato' Neoh himself heads Soon Soon Group's 26-member taskforce. He cautioned that many young people do not exhibit symptoms and are potential spreaders. In view of this, the two most important steps in the mitigation protocol to break the chain of infection are proper close contact tracing and a risk assessment programme.

He mentioned that in his factories every employee electronically fills up a form daily to keep track of who the close contacts are each day. "We set up a daily contact tracing for every staff, and have four levels of contact tracing and a 14-day risk assessment protocol. Once anyone in the company becomes Category 1 (infected) or 2, we need to retrieve the 14-days records of the individuals."

He also spoke about the various types of Covid-19 tests, namely RT-PCR, RTK-Antigen Test and the Antibody Test. "RTK-Antigen testing is useful if you detect a staff with symptoms as then you can quickly isolate all the close contacts in category 2. However, you need to reconfirm with a RT-PCR test."



▲ Sharing his knowledge during the webinar.



▲ Dato' Dr Neoh (seated) with part of his taskforce team.

Dato' Neoh also described how his companies manage air flow and purify the air-conditioning systems to prevent the spread of the virus. They treat returned air using plasmacluster ioniser and UVC light to reduce viral load in the air-conditioning system by more than 99%.

Other measures undertaken are in observing the mandated 3Cs and 3Ws, installing desk partitions, arranging alternate seating, converting large rooms into partitioned smaller offices, closing canteens, limiting people in an enclosed room, relocating staff from one department to others to avoid total shutdown of any department, and strictly adhering to the SOPs for the production area, shift changes, transport and dormitories. They also continuously educate and create awareness through their website and posters.

Responding to questions, Dato' Neoh reiterated that proper contact tracing helps to isolate the positive and/or potential Covid-19 patients, and that the heads of department are tasked to enforce the daily keeping of logs through spot checks and KPIs.

FULL THROTTLE TOWARDS DREAM CAREER IN AUTOMOBILES

Jessica Isabella Nurilahi Gallyot's lifelong fascination for cars began at a very young age when she was gifted a miniature model of the Porsche 911. Thus began her love for automobiles, especially vintage cars, while in primary school. She particularly remembers being fond of the Datsun for its "cute look".

The 23-year-old is today pursuing the career she had aspired as a child. With her maturity and determination, she excels in a male-dominated field as an automotive technician. In servicing and repairing vehicles, she even performs complex tasks like engine overhauls for distinguished and highly advanced cars, mostly BMWs and Mini Coopers.

"My dream career is what I'm doing now," said Jessica, who enrolled at WOU to pursue the Bachelor of Technology (Honours) in Mechatronics (BTME) degree in January 2021. She was awarded the WOU-LYL Partial Scholarship worth RM9,000.

"My next step is to be an automotive engineer," she stressed. "Then I want to take my master's degree and PhD. I hope to channel the knowledge I have gained throughout my learning experiences to my students."

The second of four siblings of a Portuguese dad and Indonesian mum, Jessica moved from Indonesia to Malaysia when she was just four. She holds a diploma in automotive management. Upon completing her industrial internship at Tian Siang Premium Auto in Ipoh, the BMW dealership immediately hired her in August 2019.

Jessica finds the BTME highly relevant and applicable to her career. "Modern-day vehicles are equipped with more

computer systems," she explained. "Things like control unit damage cannot be identified just with visual inspection. BMW is installed with sophisticated software, and we have electric vehicles. I will learn more about all these in BTME."

Jessica also excels in other aspects. At 15, she started entering karate competitions and two years later, she began her Muay Thai training. She studied full-time for her diploma and worked part-time while training for the Sukma games in 2018. "If life seems too easy, you will not improve," she remarked on her philosophical outlook on life.

Formerly a member of the Perak Youth Assembly, she currently sits in the executive council of the Malaysian Association of Youth Clubs in Perak and in the committee of the Kinta District Youth Council, hoping to contribute through community services and youth development programmes.



▲ Hard at work at the auto shop.

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