

Work Placements - A Survival Guide for Students

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Work Placements – A Survival Guide for Students

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*For Alexei, Ivan and Tatiana Kalveks;
Jasmine and Daniel Fletcher;
Henry Liew and Patrick Farmbrough –
may your work placements be useful,
stimulating and good fun!*

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Preface

As competition for graduate employment opportunities grows, the advantages of undertaking a work placement before leaving university are becoming increasingly apparent. Forming an important bridge between learning and earning, work placements enable students to develop and practise skills, experience workplace culture, identify or confirm their career objectives and aspirations, and define and implement their own contribution. The inclusion of workplace experience on the CV indicates that the student has some practical understanding of work-related issues in addition to theoretical knowledge, and it may also demonstrate a commitment to a specific sector or profession. Unsurprisingly, employers tend to respond very positively to students who have workplace experience, which is viewed by many as the first rung on the career ladder.

This book is an essential guide for students contemplating or embarking upon work placements. Drawing upon and punctuated by comments from students, employers and tutors, it presents what is effectively a chronological account of the process of finding, securing and learning from a work placement, and includes advice and information at each stage. The idea for the book stemmed from my own experiences as Work Placement Tutor in the Humanities and Cultural Studies Department at the University of Surrey Roehampton in 2002–3, during which time it became apparent to me that students would benefit from some written guidelines as to how to tackle each step of the process and how best to approach any related assignments.

The book begins by rationalising the increase in the number of work placement opportunities, accounting for the value of work placements for both students and employers, and identifying different types of work experience. Chapter 2 focuses on how to get started and is particularly relevant for students who are as yet undecided about their career aspirations. It encourages students to reflect on what they want, not only in terms of the sector and work involved, but also with regard to factors such as location, timescale and environment. This chapter also explains how to make an audit of skills and personal attributes which may then be used in applications for work placement. It also indicates where vacancies and potential

opportunities may be found. Chapter 3 contains practical advice on writing a CV and a letter of application, and emphasises the importance of keeping a record of applications made, of taking time to do background research and of maintaining a positive attitude. This is developed in Chapter 4 which focuses on how to perform well at interview. It emphasises the importance of good preparation and the benefits of thinking in advance about interview protocol and the questions that are likely to be asked. Developing the theme of self-reflection introduced earlier, this chapter also highlights the value in analysing interview performance and identifying strengths and weaknesses with a view to improving technique on future occasions. It also includes a checklist of points to confirm prior to accepting a work placement.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 analyse the placement experience. Chapter 5 looks at how students may derive the greatest benefit from the placement in terms of developing skills and self-awareness and making contacts for the future. Chapter 6 focuses on common problems facing students and offers suggestions on how to avoid them together with remedial strategies. Many problems arise from misconceptions or a straightforward mismatch of expectations between employers and students, and with this in mind, Chapter 7 analyses the employer's perspective, outlining key concerns and explaining the rationale underpinning the employer's point of view. This chapter also examines the role of the work placement tutor and identifies how students may derive the greatest benefit from the skill and experience of their tutor. Chapters 8 and 9 comprise case studies of students encompassing a spectrum of experiences arising as a result of different types of placement in a variety of sectors. The timescale involved also varies, and includes two weeks of continuous work, one day per week for several months, six-week internships and one-year sandwich placements.

Many universities now formally assess their work placement students by means of written or oral assignments, and Chapter 10 offers guidelines on how to approach keeping a learning log, writing a reflective essay, giving a presentation and writing a report, as these are common forms of assessment. Even if these assignments are not compulsory, students are advised to give some thought to the learning outcomes associated with these tasks, as they may be key to securing a job after graduation. As a continuation of this theme, the final chapter of the book offers advice on how to embark successfully upon the career ladder after university. Drawing on the lessons learnt from all stages of the work placement experience, it identifies how to create and implement a jobsearch strategy that is likely to lead to a successful and fulfilling outcome.

Learning through experience is invaluable, and students can benefit enormously by evaluating and acting on the views of others who have already undertaken work placements. With this in mind, I have included

direct quotations from interviewees at the end of most of the chapters. These relate to the areas covered within each relevant chapter and together represent a variety of perspectives on each situation which I hope will be of interest to readers.

This project would not have been possible without assistance and support from a number of sources and I should like to take this opportunity to record my appreciation. Many thanks to all the organisations who have shared resources and information, particularly the National Council for Work Experience, Bournemouth University, Brunel University, the University of Greenwich, the University of Surrey Roehampton and Dr Challoner's High School, Buckinghamshire. Special thanks are due to Ann Bennett, Karen Collier, Sue Dooks, Karen Ephram, Nicola MacLeod, Doug Perkins, Liz Rhodes MBE and Seema Shoor, and to my colleagues at Roehampton Surrey, namely Dr Anita Biressi, Chris Bond, Professor Lyndie Brimstone and Carol Prior. I am very grateful to my publisher, Suzannah Burywood, for her faith in the project in the early stages when it was expressed in just two sides of A4 paper, and to David Gibson and my husband Rudolph Kalveks for their invaluable advice and help in getting the project off the ground. Finally, and most important of all, many thanks to all the students, employers and tutors who took the time and trouble to share their opinions on all the various aspects of the work placement process covered in this book.