Why is work experience important?

Work experience makes students stand out from the competition when it comes to finding a job. Almost any kind of work experience can make you more attractive to employers and without a doubt, it is one of the best things you can do to make yourself more employable.

Work experience helps you to;

- Develop your interpersonal, transferable and specialist skills
- Put your academic knowledge into practice in the real world
- Explore your options and clarify your own career goals
- Network and build potential referees for future job applications
- Potentially receive a ‘foot in the door’ and possible job offer

Types of work experience

There are so many different names given to work experience and this can often cause confusion. Just remember it doesn’t have to be paid for it to have value; action and responsibility is more important than how much you were paid!

Internships – often take place over the summer but also at other times of the year. They are mostly paid and you become involved in day to day work activities.

Placements – these are usually paid, part of your degree and the work that you undertake are often at graduate level often with a focus on a particular project.

Work shadowing – usually unpaid and just for a day or two where you closely observe someone at work doing a particular role and asking them questions to get to know the role. Useful for people who want to check-out different careers before they commit to them.

Work experience – is often unpaid and short term e.g. a few days or weeks, where you may be doing some observing or getting involved in some work activities.

Volunteering – if you have a connection with an organisation’s ethos, if you are passionate about the environment you might volunteer for Greenpeace. Whilst unpaid, this is very useful on your CV in terms of experience and transferable skills. Areas such as the environment and charity sectors expect you to have undertaken a considerable amount of volunteering.

Clubs/societies – Not strictly work experience but can be used to demonstrate certain skills and experience. If you have a responsible role such as chairperson or treasurer, this is useful experience to put in your CV or on an application form in terms of transferable skills.

Getting started here at Reading

Visit Reading.ac.uk/careers to see the schemes you can get involved in such as the Reading Internship Scheme (RIS), the RED Award and the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP). There are other opportunities to get involved in such as Students in Schools and volunteering with one of the university’s museum.

reading.ac.uk/careers
Professional placements in the curriculum - We strongly encourage you to consider doing a placement as part of your degree programme if you’ve not already chosen to do a professional placement year as part of your course. If you don’t have a mandatory placement as part of your degree, check out the optional work related learning modules and sign up ASAP! We have many flexible placement options, from a professional placement year, to shorter summer placements which are all credit bearing. Speak to the Placement Tutor or Placement Coordinator in your department about what type of placements are available.

Careers run workshops on writing CVs and finding work experience. You can develop your networking skills at careers fairs and if you want a CV or application checked arrange to see a Careers Consultant.

Making applications

The principles are usually the same if you are looking for work experience, shadowing or placements. There are two main ways of accessing opportunities: directly through advertised vacancies and indirectly through speculatively approaching organisations to see if they would consider you.

Advertised positions - If a position is advertised then check the application process as for placements/internships some deadlines are early and can vary from year to year. You may need to complete online application forms, undertake psychometric tests and attend assessment centres including a formal interview. Research well so you match the competencies required. Identify experiences which elicit skills needed, keep to the word count, use active verbs and ensure your referees know exactly what you are applying for so they can highlight your relevant attributes.

Speculative Applications - Only about 30% of positions are advertised, so it is well worth building contacts and making speculative applications. If you are interested in working locally check out local online business directories such as Yell or Indeed and approach companies with a speculative email and CV, telling them why you’re interested in working for them and what you have to offer. Be sure to make the most of any existing networks you may have e.g. Family, friends, tutors and alumni. Online networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn may help you with this. Source other contacts through professional bodies, chambers of commerce, career directories and company websites.

Useful websites

- reading.ac.uk/careers
- Prospects
- Campus Jobs
- Milkround
- TargetJobs
- Step
- RateMyPlacement
- students.linkedin.com

reading.ac.uk/careers
Top tips

- Remember to plan the type of work experience you need. Think about what kind of skills you want to gain from it, and which particular areas of the industry you need to focus on.
- Thoroughly research any company you are applying to.
- Don’t undersell yourself, clearly state your skills and attributes in your CV and your interview.
- Make the most of your vacations as they are a great opportunity to gain experience.
- Make sure you have your CV and or LinkedIn profile ready
- Make use of all your contacts and try to create potential for some interesting projects through speculative approaches
- Keep a record of all your training responsibilities and achievements
- Email the company to thank them formally, and follow up any action points that they may have recommended to you, especially if you promised to do them!