

Section 1

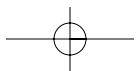
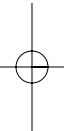
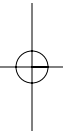
Getting Placement

If you aim to get a placement whilst at university, this section will help you to navigate the opportunities, challenges, achievements and some frustrations and disappointments in the process.

So in, **Chapter 1 Finding your Placement**, we give you advice on how to find those placement opportunities, using well known, and some less well known techniques.

Whilst many students may have experience of applying for part time work, selection for placement opportunities is usually much more demanding, and may often as structured as full graduate recruitment processes. So in **Chapter 2 Applying for Roles**, we give advice about different application processes and how you can present your personal information in a way which is most likely to attract organisations. In **Chapter 3 Interviews and Assessment Centres** we explain how to prepare for selection processes, and tips on how to make the most of the actual day.

There are important legal requirements with you must comply in your placement, especially if you are receiving benefits, or working internationally. In **Chapter 4 The Important Not-so-Small Print** we outline the main issues which you should be looking for, and point to where to go if you need additional help.



Chapter 2

Finding a Placement

Chapter Contents

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2.1 Why organisations offer placements

Organisations themselves have a variety of motivations for offering student placements – as additional support, as a way of developing learning in the organisation, developing a recruitment pool for graduates, and even for more highly principled reasons such as developing the next generation of entrants with appropriate work skills.

The Lambert Review (2003) of business–university collaboration highlighted the importance of business helping to develop entrepreneurship and business awareness through placements. Furthermore, it suggested that 59 per cent of employers said they provided work experience or placements for graduates in 2007, and 22 per cent would be prepared to increase the number of placements (CBI/Pertemps, 2007). So in principle, there will be places for everyone who looks for a placement, even though very many organisations do not actively advertise that they take placement students.

The example below is based on a discussion with the European HR Director for Enterprise Rent-A-Car:

Placement scheme – Enterprise Rent-A-Car In discussion with the European HR Director

Why do it? What does Enterprise get from it?

There are many benefits that Enterprise receives from our intern programme. The key reason is talent. By having a placement programme in place, we have access to students early. We promote our programme to first and second year students, whilst some companies only select second year students. This opens the door for us to get access to these students, and ensures that we are not missing out on this talent.

We offer very flexible options for students ranging from summer or year round placements. Many of our interns continue working part-time when they return back to university. Again, this gives us the opportunity to keep them in our pipeline – and to keep them busy and not interested with other employers.

Recruiting interns into our business also helps us operationally over the busy summer months. And because many of our interns want to continue working for Enterprise once the scheme ends, they will continue to work part time and during the holidays.

We have a number of our interns that apply for campus brand manager roles for us. This also embeds them further into our culture. Because the students already interact with departments, lecturers and student organisations, these brand managers can quickly build relationships and influence others. For the students, it's a fantastic opportunity to put "serving in a leadership role" for Enterprise Rent-A-Car on their CV, and they can also make a bit of cash in the process.

We do offer our successful interns places on our graduate scheme for when they complete university. We do this at the end of their second year of their placement. This further cements our relationship with them – and they can get on with enjoying their final year and not having to worry about searching for a job.

How many interns are taken on permanently?

We currently take on 80 per cent of interns into our full time graduate management scheme. The good news is that whilst the students are on the placement scheme, the time that they spend with us counts in their time in the management role. So, if a student spends a year with us, it's possible that they will complete the management trainee role and qualify to become a management assistant. When they return post graduation, they don't begin again as a management trainee – they go right into a management assistant role and hit the ground running.

How do students apply?

Interns take on the very same responsibilities as our management trainees. They will get hands-on and classroom experience from the very first day. Interns learn about sales, marketing, customer service, business management and operations. And the expectations for performance are at the same level. Therefore, we use exactly the same application process for our intern programme as we do for our management trainee scheme. This is a combination of an online application, face to face interviews and an assessment centre. Throughout the interview process, we look at the same competencies which we know will give the intern a good chance of becoming a permanent fixture with Enterprise once they graduate.

2.2 What organisations look for in placement students

It is an important thought – although somewhat depressing – that, at national level at least, employers’ representatives such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) see problems with the quality of students in the job market. As a potential placement student, you need to understand these perceived shortcomings, since it will give you the opportunity to present your application more strongly. Table 2.1 shows where employers believe graduates need stronger skills.

Table 2.1 is a useful benchmark to understand what you can do individually to improve your preparations for placement, how to present your

Table 2.1 Areas where employers are dissatisfied with key skills of graduates

Skill	Employers expressing dissatisfaction
Foreign languages	54%
Business awareness, satisfaction and loyalty	48%
Self-management – accept responsibility	36%
Enterprise/innovation/creativity	27%
Generic employability skills	27%
Knowledge about chosen career	26%
Basic literacy and use of English	26%
Positive attitude towards work	21%
Basic numeracy skills	17%

Source: CBI/Pertemps, 2007

application, and how to develop your employability whilst you are on a placement, so as to maximise your job seeking opportunities when you do graduate. We will focus on how you can do this within this book.

So what do individual organisations look for as they recruit placement students? In the box below, we show a selection of the academic disciplines and competences which a selection of organisations say they look for in placement students. Of course, this is only a sample of organisations, and different organisations will have different requirements. But the two key messages to take from this sample are:

- Organisations are rarely prescriptive about which degree you are studying, although specialist roles do require specialist degrees, and there is a tendency to prefer business studies subjects for commercial roles. According to the Confederation for British Industry (CBI), employers put greater emphasis on generic employability skills than a specific degree subject, so that about 70 per cent of advertised graduate jobs do not specify a degree subject (CBI, 2007: 20)
- Far more important are the competences which organisations look for – team work, delivering results, ability to learn, customer orientation, and so on. We will discuss in Chapters 3 and 4 how to demonstrate these competences, but it is essential that you can provide evidence from your previous experience in these areas.

What placement organisations are looking for

Each organisation has its own requirements for placements, but here are some of the key things which organisations have told us they particularly want to see when appointing placement students:

National Supermarket Chain Somerfield

Academic disciplines: We decide the department for the placement first and then decide on the relevant academic background, which generally doesn't need to be precise.

Competences: Individual backgrounds and knowledge are less important for us. What we really want are drive, energy, and a willingness to learn and succeed. An understanding and to see appreciation of great customer service is also key.

Financial Services Company

Find out about the placement organisation before you apply and go for interview. We always ask candidates what they know about us. Some of them seem to know more about the company than we do which is obviously impressive.

Global Energy Company BP

Academic disciplines: Our placements may cover 17 different disciplines. For some, such as engineering, and sciences we look for specialised courses. For our commercial placements, including HR, Finance, and purchasing, we pay more attention to the student than specialist academic qualifications.

Competences: All placement applications are then assessed on thinking ability; working together; business sense; influencing skills; personal drive; and technical excellence in the area to which they have applied for a role.

LloydsTSB

Academic disciplines: We encourage applications from all degree disciplines choosing to focus more on the skills and behaviours a candidate demonstrates. For us, a clear motivation and understanding of the area applied to is essential. For Corporate Markets, a Financial discipline such as Maths, Economics or Finance is a pre-requisite.

Competences: We look for judgment, drive, influence and execution where leading teams to deliver, showing sound decision making and a clear motivation are key.

Global communications BT

Academic disciplines: For technical roles, we generally recruit from a computer sciences related subject; for more commercial roles, we recruit from any discipline, but they do tend to be business focused.

Competences: Customer focus; communication; and team working skills.

Savings, Investments, and Insurance organisation

Academic disciplines: A business related degree is most relevant for this sector.

Competences: Customer focus; teamwork and interpersonal skills; self development; integrity.

Global Aerospace Manufacture

Academic disciplines: Broad-based subjects for business related areas, and specialist engineering degrees for engineering placements.

Competences: Team work behaviours are essential; proactive; good self-organisation.

UK Border Agency

Academic disciplines: no preferred subject for 70 per cent of graduate roles.

Competences: Self-management; team working; business and customer awareness; problem-solving; communication and literacy; application of numeracy.

2.3 When to look for a placement

There are few ‘rules’ for when to start looking for a suitable placement, other than to start early (12–15 months before your planned placement period), and never to give up!

For long term placements in larger organisations, make sure that you start your search, and your applications as early as possible since many larger organisations work on placement recruitment in the Autumn before the Autumn they expect placements to start. But placement vacancies will still be available in the few months prior to the actual start dates.

For medium term placements (say, 3 months), a shorter application process is normally expected. However, if you are considering a placement in popular areas (such as book, media, or web publishing) do be prepared for strong competition if you are proposing to do a ‘stand alone’ placement over the summer vacation.

Short term placements (1–2 weeks) are usually unpaid, but if you can afford the time (and cost) are great ways to get an insight into your target organisation/role/profession. You may be able to arrange a short term placement without too much previous notice, especially if this is through a direct approach to the organisation, or a networked contact. Once again, however, there are no strict rules to this, and some organisations with highly popular short term internships (for example, the BBC) may look at placement applications many months in advance of their actual requirements. Also, like holiday bookings, short term placements may be easier to organise outside obviously popular periods, such as university summer vacations – if you can be flexible on dates, you may be more likely to be successful with short term applications. Applications for short term placements often have a short shelf life – if you haven’t heard anything within 2–3 months, then assume that you are unsuccessful: if you are determined to get in, have another look at your application, then reapply.

University advice on finding that placement

- A placement is a structured learning experience – not just a contract of employment. So make sure that your placement will give you learning and development opportunities.
- Unless you are working in a very competitive industry, don’t be tempted by unpaid or poorly paid placements.
- Don’t think of yourself as ‘the placement student’ – you can make a huge contribution so don’t undervalue yourself.

Advice from the National Council for Work Experience (NCWE) on finding and securing a placement

Whether you are looking for a year's internship as part of your course, or a few weeks work during the holidays, here are a few tips for securing that all important placement which may give you the edge in the graduate job market.

- Attend the National Work Placement Exhibition every October and November.
- Look at websites, for example, Graduate Prospects has a search placement facility.
- Newspapers.
- Use your careers advisory service – they offer a wealth of experience on work experience, and can advise on where to find the work experience you are interested in as well as helping tailor CVs and covering letters to give the maximum chance of success.
- Do your homework – find a company you would like to work for and check out their website. Companies like applicants to show that they have done their homework on the business.
- Presentation – first impressions count! Turning up for an interview in jeans and trainers is unlikely to impress. An interview is your chance to sell yourself so dress for success.
- Timing is everything – spring and summer are good times to apply speculatively as employers will be considering how to cover staff holidays – you might be the perfect person to fill the gap.
- Look for organisations with recognised programmes, for example those with an NCWE Work Experience Award or Quality Mark accreditation.

2.4 What you want to gain from a placement

Try to think about your placement as more than 'something you have to do', and really think proactively about what you want to get out of it. For example, we have already seen in Chapter 1 that organisational size does not necessarily mean a better quality placement, since smaller organisations may give you more variety and responsibility than a larger one; smaller organisations may also be preferable if you are doing specialised work.

Similarly, think about the type of role you want. Do you want a specialist role to enhance your specialist or professional knowledge (for example in IT, law, finance, media, or engineering?), or a more generalist one to gain a more general understanding of how a business runs?

Think also about the competences (Chapter 3 and 4) and skills (Chapter 2) which you already have, and still need to develop for when you have finished your studies. If you have a specialist career in mind, then working on specific areas of technical, specialist, or professional practice may be best. If you still are uncertain about your future career, then a general route is usually better.

Student placements preferences

[Student on a 2 × 6 month placement scheme] I chose HSBC because I liked the roles they were offering and thought it would look good on my CV. My second placement was with [a smaller organisation] called Astellas. I chose this job as something I would really enjoy, and because I had a good feeling about the company and the job. Having worked at HSBC...I was looking for a smaller company, and felt that I would benefit from this experience and enjoy it more.

I mainly wanted to work in a large company so that I could get experience in a big organisation. I also wanted to work in a big organisation on my CV, and hoped that I could work for this organisation in the future.

I started looking at organisations which might be fun to work with – [organisation names withheld]...But then I began to realise that whilst they may look attractive on the outside, when thoroughly researched, they would not be particularly beneficial to me in terms of self development and graduate opportunities. I then started to apply for companies which had a strong focus on personal development and had good graduate opportunities.

2.5 Where to look

The sources of information on placements (and subsequent graduate careers) are generally under-exploited as suggested in the Figure 2.1 below. Here, we will look at the range of sources of information which you should consider in your search for a placement.

University placement service

Your university placement office is the obvious starting point for most placements, and to advise you. Not only will they have great contacts with organisations who have worked with them successfully in the past, so have a good idea of the number, type, and culture of the organisation, but they will also be liaising with managers who will tend to be familiar with the type of student they will get, and assessment and in-service work requirements. Your university placement office wants you to succeed, and is well equipped to help you to do so.

Finding a Placement

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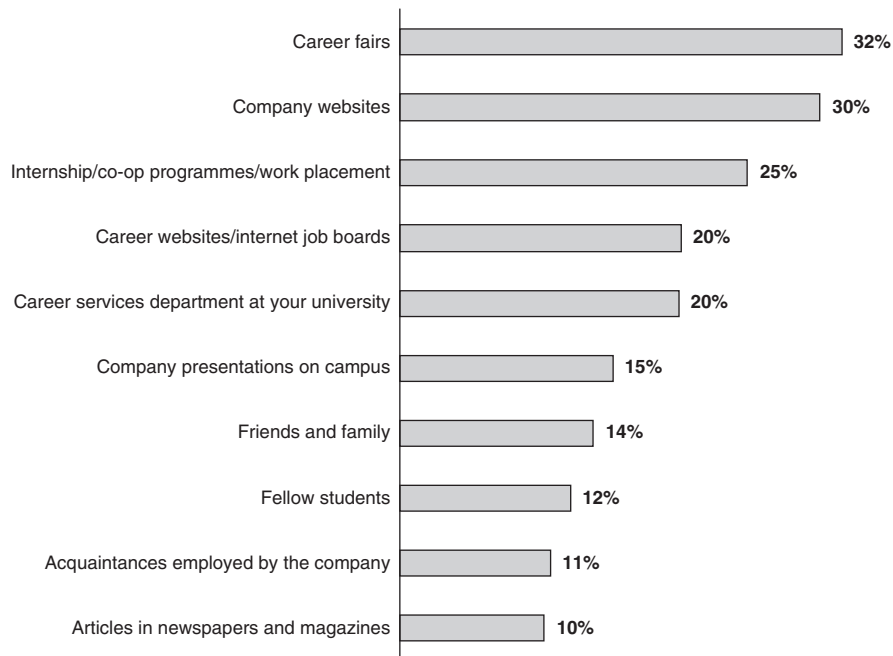


Figure 2.1 Sources for finding graduate/placement opportunities of UK university students

Source: Universum (2006) Used with permission

A minority of students reported that their placement offices either seemed to want to push students in a particular direction, or wanted to vet placement organisations before giving approval for the placement. Remember, however, that your placement office wants you to succeed. The placement office is much more likely to be able to help you if you have done initial research and preparation, and can articulate what it is that you want to achieve from your placement.

‘Skiing off-piste’

Organisations may prefer to take students from particular universities. In limited cases, this is because they genuinely believe those students are ‘best quality’ for them. But in most cases, they work with a limited number of universities simply because it is administratively easier to handle relationships with those universities. So, if you find that an organisation takes placements/internships, but is not on the list of available placements at universities, and you are convinced that you would like to apply to them, then do so!

Graduate careers and placement conferences and fairs

These are great places for improving your understanding of opportunities, timescales and requirements. Graduate careers fairs will tell you some of the organisations in the market for graduate job opportunities, and may give you leads for placement opportunities as well. Placement

fairs give more precise targeting to organisations who are looking for placement students, and some of these will also be using placement students as part of their graduate recruitment processes. These fairs also have short workshops and presentations on application processes, so help you to become more street wise in how to apply. But don't forget that these fairs are only a small snap shot of the range of opportunities available, and for you to get out and search for.

Web searches

Also a great way to start your search, and see some of the placement opportunities. Again, this helps you to understand what is available and role requirements, but don't forget that there will be many other organisations – often the smaller organisations – who would welcome a placement student, but who have not advertised on websites.

Direct application

Direct applications can involve a high number of enquiries to a limited number of successful follow ups. But even if an organisation is not advertising a placement or internship it may still welcome an application, especially for short term internships. According to the Employment Trends Survey (CBI/Pertemps, 2007) the key here is to have researched the organisation, and be clear about what you can offer that organisation, and what you would like to achieve from a placement. You are more likely to be successful, if you:

- Have already networked with someone in that organisation, through earlier work experience, job fair, social meeting, etc.
- Have researched the organisation's website (where there is one), so as to have a clearer picture of their activities, how they prefer to handle job vacancies and applications, and, by looking at current vacancies which they may be advertising, how they describe competences and skills relevant to that organisation.
- Can address your application to a named individual in the organisation.
- Ensure that your targeted CV is accompanied by a short letter of application (see Chapter 3).
- Follow up with a telephone call, 3–4 weeks after your initial enquiry.
- It is debatable whether a posted letter or email is more likely to be successful

Networking; family and friends; previous employers; other students

Make sure that family and friends know that you will be looking for a placement, and start this process 15–18 months ahead of when you want your placement. The two reasons for doing this are to gather views and ideas about places to work, and what you might expect, and to exploit any direct

or indirect contacts which may lead to further ideas on a good placement, or more directly to a placement opportunity.

Overseas placements and internships

These may be amongst the most attractive for some students in terms of personal development. But despite the clear learning and development benefits of working abroad, there are practicalities which also need to be considered. Overseas placements are usually difficult to organise unless you already have clear and established contacts abroad (for example, through your university). Once abroad, your placement may also be more difficult to manage, so requires a good level of independence and resilience on behalf of the student. Finally, if you are considering your placement as a potential direct entry route into a graduate level job with a particular organisation (rather than as a learning experience in its own right), a UK placement may be preferable. (See also Chapter 5.)

2.6 Updating your employability before placements

As well as applying for suitable placement opportunities, you are strongly advised to ensure that you update your skills so as to make the most of your placement, once you start it.

Think about the types of skills which your placement organisation may be looking for, then plan how you will meet any gaps. For example, how comfortable are you making presentations now? If the answer is 'not very', then this is a good time to become better prepared. Use the skill self-assessment audit in Table 2.2 to look at the types of skills you will need in the work place, how you may improve them, and then to plan what you will do to make sure that you are ready.

Not only will it help you to update your skills prior to selection and placement, it will also be of benefit when you are working and to your study skills on return to university.

2.7 Further information

Many websites provide further information on placements, including opportunities overseas. Here is a selection of those available at the time this book went to press. But remember too that many organisations, especially smaller businesses, may not advertise a placement opportunity – so find these out and contact them directly.

National Council for Work Experience

<http://www.work-experience.org/ncwe.rd/index.jsp>

The essential first visit site to get your bearings on placements and gateway to many ideas and possibilities.

Table 2.2 Skill self-assessment audit

Skill	Typical Employer Requirements	You may need to do more preparation if you....	Development Ideas	Your personal action plan – What will you personally do to develop these skill areas?
Time keeping	Arrive at meetings and at work on time! Deliver required work on time, even if this means you need to put in extra effort, time, or research	Are usually late or unreliable for lectures, seminars, etc Hand in work on time	Get into the habit of keeping a diary. Plan longer term work, and break it down into milestones, noted in your diary }	
Work prioritisation	Deliver required work on time, even if this means you need to put in extra effort, time, or research	Find it difficult to balance workloads, eg skip seminars to meet hand-in deadlines for other subjects	Step back and think why this is happening. Do you have too much on, with too many competing demands? Or not using time as effectively as you should?	
Numeracy	Non-specialist roles: Able to undertake simple percentage, fractional, adding and subtracting calculations; able to undertake more	Have had little practice using numeracy skills since GCSE. Little practice using numeracy skills on spreadsheets	Practise now. You can buy a test book or do tests on line	

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Skill	Typical Employer Requirements	You may need to do more preparation if you....	Development Ideas	Your personal action plan – What will you personally do to develop these skill areas?
Writing	complex calculations using spreadsheets; able to draw accurate tables, graphs, etc using software, and interpret results intelligently Specialist roles: If your subject has more advanced numeracy, mathematical, or statistical requirements, ensure that you are fully competent in these Write straightforward reports and correspondence using appropriate structures, grammar, and spelling, and punctuation. Ability to prepare short	Have difficulty planning and writing university assignments		

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Skill	Typical Employer Requirements	You may need to do more preparation if you....	Development Ideas	Your Personal action plan – What will you personally do to develop these skill areas?
Presentation	<p>reports and letters to a brief or with minimal guidance</p> <p>In work and assessment, make a presentation in a professional manner, take questions, deal with some resistance/hostility from the audience</p>	<p>Little or no experience of presentations; reluctant to volunteer for presentations in seminars, unfamiliar with using flip charts and PowerPoint (including computers) for presentations.</p>	<p>Become actively involved with society or tutorial presentations</p> <p>Read Chapter 4 which has tips for improving presentations.</p> <p>Join university societies which give you opportunities to speak in public, or perform (drama, music, etc).</p>	
Self motivation/drive	<p>A competence more than a skill. But employers look for ability to work to deadlines without constant supervision, and show initiative as required</p>	<p>Skip seminars, lectures, and sports training or practice sessions.</p> <p>Fail to do required reading for seminars</p>	<p>Not easy to learn from a course or a book.</p> <p>Set yourself goals, write them down, check how often you have achieved or ducked them.</p> <p>Discuss with a mentor</p>	

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Skill	Typical Employer Requirements	You may need to do more preparation if you....	Development Ideas	Your personal action plan – What will you personally do to develop these skill areas?
Computer Skills	Fully competent in all major programmes, including word, databases; spreadsheets; file management	Most students cope well with Word packages. How comfortable are you with spreadsheets, preparing graphs, using databases, etc?	Find a place to do the European Computer Driving Licence qualification; your university may do this as an extra-curricular course	

AIESEC

<http://www.aiesec.org/cms/aiesec/AI/index.html>

According to Kofi Annan (Former UN Secretary General), AIESEC offers a wide range of international opportunities, conferences, and exchanges ... and serves as an agent of positive change through education and cultural exchange to develop a broader understanding of cultural, socio-economical and business management issues. Go to their website and see the wider range of student opportunities available internationally.

GO Wales

<http://www.gowales.co.uk/>

Great selection of placements graduate opportunities, and more) in Wales.

Shell STEP Summer Placements

www.step.org.uk

United Euro Bridge

<http://www.unitedeurobridge.org>

A voluntary organisation which aims to improve the availability of placement opportunities for students across Europe.

Ideas for Placements

www.doctorjob.co.uk/workexperience

www.justjobsfor4students.co.uk

www.fledglings.net/
www.milkround.com

Internships in the USA

www.aipt.org/

Europe

www.iaeste.org.uk/students.htm

Checklist

- 1 Undertake an honest self assessment of your current levels of skills, and decide how you can develop and practise these ahead of your applications and selections.
- 2 Start thinking about what kind of role you want and why. Specialist to develop professional skills, or generalist to give you a taste of different aspects of organisational life?
- 3 If you are thinking about going abroad for your placement, start looking early, and realistically (see also Chapter 5 for information on practicalities).