

Why Do Work Experience?

To have a successful career, it's important that you take any opportunity you can to increase your awareness about the world of work and your place in it.

Making successful career decisions requires access to accurate information about many aspects of employment; much of that information may be available through a work experience placement. Work experience adds to the skills & knowledge you develop while at University, and provides another avenue for learning, one that's outside the classroom and in the 'real world'.

Undertaking some work experience relevant to your degree can provide you with at least two things that will help your career: **personal insight** and a **competitive edge**.

Personal insight

Activities like work experience can give you valuable insight into:

- the world of work generally
- the industry, profession or area your degree is taking you
- your preferred working style and work environment
- your strengths and weaknesses

Work experience allows you to experience and observe the realities of life in an organisation, and enables you talk to people within your chosen industry and profession.

You can compare the job duties, working conditions and industry practices against your initial expectations. The insights you gain can then be measured against your existing career goals. Is it what you expected? Have your career goals been confirmed, or do you want to modify them? Have you discovered a new area of work you hadn't considered before?

If you're uncertain as to your career goals, and unsure about what you want to do with your degree, work experience can enable you to work in various fields without a long-term commitment, and open your eyes to all the possibilities. You may then be able to clarify your career plans, and identify the particular field you want to pursue after graduation.

Personal development

Apart from the direct work-related insights, you may also find you develop on a more personal level as well, once you've been subjected to the challenges and responsibilities of the professional workplace.

A work experience placement can give you an opportunity to grow in self-confidence, initiative, maturity and self-management. You'll gain a greater sense of self-awareness, and be able to identify your personal strengths and weaknesses, prioritising areas for improvement.

You'll also gain some insight into your preference in terms of work environments and styles; did you enjoy undertaking one project at a time, or did you really feel energised by having every day full of varied and unexpected activities and challenges?

Competitive Edge

To compete successfully in the graduate employment market, it's important for you to be proactive and take responsibility for developing your skills and attributes.

Remember, you may be competing against not only your peers in this university or from universities across Victoria, but also from universities across Australia and from around the world. So you need to set yourself apart from the rest of the graduate market.

Graduate employers are looking for candidates with demonstrated generic skills in areas such as: communication, teamwork, problem solving, self-management, initiative, planning & organising, using technology and the ability to adapt & learn. All these skills - known as 'employability skills' - are crucial in the workplace.

For More Information on employability skills, La Trobe University Careers & Employment has developed a set of employability skills toolkits, available here:

In a general sense, employers value greatly any experience you've had in what they might call "the real world" of work. They will especially value experiences directly connected with their industry or profession.

Application of Academic Learning

In your course, you have learned some specific skills in an academic environment. Now you have to apply this theoretical knowledge to real life situations. How would you use these skills in the workplace? Work experience enables you to test out how these skills are used in a work environment, and to check whether your skills are at the right standard.

Work experience can help you develop ideas for final year projects that are based on real-world scenarios. You may even be able to develop a project that meets both your academic requirements and the needs of a particular company, which could result in an ongoing relationship with that company.

Supercharge your resume!

Resumes that can demonstrate experience in the professional workplace do stand out. Work experience gives you an opportunity to demonstrate both your technical and employability skills, enabling you to include valuable information on your resume.

This is particularly important if you need to fill skill or knowledge gaps in your resume; if you're a student who hasn't had the opportunity to gain any paid or voluntary employment in your chosen field, then undertaking work experience means that you can still include examples of industry experience and knowledge in your resume.

Networking

Work experience is also an opportunity for you to network and build business contacts. You may meet people during your work-experience placement who could be useful in the future; as referees, to give you career advice or to alert you to potential opportunities.

Through the workplace, you may get access to industry events, information seminars, or the opportunity to join an industry body. All these activities will help you develop industry knowledge and contacts.

Smooth Transition into Graduate Work

In today's competitive environment, employers now expect graduates to be able to quickly make a transition to graduate work. Once you start your graduate position, you'll be able to 'hit the ground running' if you've already got some experience in the field.

Knowledge of workplace etiquette, an awareness of what's important from an employer's perspective, and an appreciation of basic business communication skills will all help you make your entry into the graduate labour market much easier.

Job Seeking & Job Interview Experience

Any activity you can undertake that allows you to practise the various components of job search and the recruitment process is clearly beneficial. Every interview you go to - whether for a work-experience placement, voluntary activity or part-time job - will improve your technique for future job interviews. Your work experience can also provide you with examples when answering behavioural questions at job interviews,.

Finding Work Experience Opportunities

Finding work experience will involve mostly the same strategies as looking for a job. In that regard, it can provide you with valuable experience of the activities involved in seeking graduate employment; you will find that while many high profile graduate positions are advertised widely, many jobs are not found through newspapers or Internet job seeking sites. Work experience positions are often not advertised, and may be a part of the "hidden job market" You will have to explore, research and network in order to discover your own work experience opportunity.

A big advantage of finding your own work experience placement is that you are able to target specific employers and industry areas that are directly relevant to your course, your interests and your career goals. More information on the job search process can be found here:

Research strategies

CareerHub

A useful feature of CareerHub is its ability to provide details of those employers who have contacted the University in the past with job vacancies and graduate recruitment opportunities. Start with these potential leads; they have already demonstrated their awareness of the benefits La Trobe University students could bring to their workplace. They're also likely to be in an industry relevant to La Trobe University students, and undertake activities that could be directly related to La Trobe courses.

Professional Associations

There are many ways that professional and industry associations may assist you in your search. Their websites will usually provide useful general information on the industry or profession, including labour market trends, future directions, and links to other relevant sites.

Many associations also provide more specialised services for their members, including access to information seminars, networking events, job vacancies, conference proceedings, and other professional development activities.

Investigate the levels of membership available, the costs involved, and the benefits you may receive from membership of the association relevant to your field.

Work Experience Expo

La Trobe University has a Work Experience Expo on campus each August when representatives from a wide variety of organisations are available to talk to students about work placement / work experience opportunities.

Career & employment portals

Use these sites not only to look for advertised opportunities, but primarily to research particular organisations.

Graduate Careers

Comprehensive source of information about graduate careers and employment, including job vacancy search , career profiles , Careers Service contacts , résumé and job application writing tips , interview strategies and information about further study.
www.graduatecareers.com.au

GradsOnline

Provides information on graduate destinations, employment and starting salaries.
www.gradsonline.com.au

Graduate Opportunities

Key features of website include employer profiles of national and international companies, as well as career and job-hunting advice.
www.graduateopportunities.com

My Future

Australia's national career information and exploration service, helping people to make career decisions, plan career pathways and manage work transitions.
www.myfuture.edu.au

What information should I be looking for?

In terms of the specific industry you're targeting, areas to research include its history and likely direction, major players in the industry and how they compare, high-demand or growth areas, industry or professional events and conferences, and career path options.

Once you've identified a likely organisation and are exploring their website, research their history, services or products, their structure in terms of parent companies and subsidiaries, the scope of their business, their niche and reputation within the industry, recent developments including new products or projects, their corporate values and the direction they see themselves moving towards in the future.

Family/friends/own networks

Don't underestimate your own networks – ask around your family and friends for possible contacts to follow up. More information on networking is available [here](#)

Contacting the Employer

Email Contact with Employers

If you are emailing an employer with an enquiry about work experience, don't forget to treat the email as an additional piece of formal business communication. Even if you've attached a cover letter and resume, the email itself will be the first piece of information about yourself that the employer will read. Ensure you write it in a business-like fashion.

Do: use a similar style of greeting and general language as you would in a cover letter – read the recommendations and examples included in this publication.

Don't: treat the email in an informal way. Avoid chatty, casual language. While you may be used to contacting your friends, tutors or current employers in a relaxed fashion, this email is going to a business or professional who doesn't know you. You want them to remember you for all the right reasons! Be business-like and polite.

Resume

Your resume for the most part will be similar to the resumes you assemble when applying for other positions like vacation work, graduate recruitment programs and professional vacancies. More information on resume writing is available [here](#).

Cover Letter

Most of your applications enquiring about work experience will be unsolicited; you'll be 'cold canvassing', applying not in response to a specific advertisement, but speculatively. In that case, the covering letter will be particularly important; and the opening paragraphs even more so!

Do **not** produce one cover letter and send it out to multiple employers. Such a letter would have to be very general in tone and content, and could not reflect each potential employer's circumstances & needs. Produce a specific cover letter for *each* employer.

After introducing yourself, you will need to state very clearly the reasons you are seeking work experience, and how you see the work experience helping you achieve your career goals. Most importantly, emphasise what you can offer the organisation.

Be aware that in addition to the knowledge gained in your discipline or field, you will have gained general skills important to all employers and essential for many job roles. These skills are often referred to as 'employability skills', and include communication, teamwork, problem solving, planning & organising, self-management & initiative, being responsible for your own learning and the ability to use information technology.

It's likely that you've developed these skills through a range of activities: your academic studies, employment, voluntary work, community activities, and membership of clubs, sporting teams or other societies.

Presentation

You must pay close attention to the presentation of your covering letter; positive first impressions are vital if you want the employer to read the letter and actively consider your request. The following points should ensure that it looks professional and is easy to read:

- The covering letter should not be longer than one A4 page.
- Use a size 12 font and a style that is professional, easy to read and widely available such as Arial or Times New Roman.
- Use natural language that is business-like without being stilted or old fashioned.
- Ensure that there are absolutely no spelling, grammatical or typographical errors by spell-checking your letter **AND** asking someone to proof read the letter for you.

More information on presentation is available in the La Trobe Essential Careers Guide, which you can purchase from Careers & Employment for \$5. A summary of this information can be found on the Careers website here.

Basic Format and Structure

It might be useful to look at each paragraph of your cover letter and identify what it needs to convey.

Top of the page

At the top left of the page should be:

- your address
- the date, and
- the name, title, organisation and address of the person to whom you are writing.

In cold canvassing letters, it's advisable, where possible, to find out the name or title of the person responsible for handling recruitment; check the company's website, or make enquiries by phone.

Start the letter 'Dear Mr Smith' rather than 'Dear John', and never use 'Dear John Smith' or 'Dear Mr John Smith'. If you cannot find out the person's name, start the letter 'Dear Sir/Madam', *not* 'To whom it may concern'.

Paragraph 1 – Introduction

What's the purpose of your letter? Introduce yourself and your current studies. Explain why you're writing; you're seeking a work experience placement. How does that fit in with your career goals?

Paragraph 2 – Why this company?

This paragraph covers why you're interested specifically in this company. Did you read about them in a professional publication, talk to a representative at a career fair or other activity? Use this as an opportunity to demonstrate that you've researched the company, its values, activities, and possible future directions.

Now focus on writing one or two paragraphs that describe your 'key selling points'.

Paragraph 3 – Why should an employer select you? (part 1)

Here you will be summarising your specific professional skills and knowledge. Detail information like your major studies or specialist stream, academic achievements, research projects and membership of relevant associations. Make sure they are directly relevant to the needs of the employer.

Paragraph 4 – Why should an employer select you? (part 2)

This paragraph enables you to expand on the skills you've gained through other avenues, particularly through employment, voluntary or community activities. You're looking to

demonstrate your broader life skills & experiences, particularly in areas like communications, team work, and self-management.

Paragraph 5 – Appreciation & follow up

Finish on a positive note, thanking employer for their time, and expressing interest in following up with an interview.

Sample Cold Canvassing Cover Letter

21 Highlight Street
Bundoora, 3086

1 May 2009

Ms Elizabeth Gantner
Manager, Human Resources
Global Solutions
43 Main Street
Melbourne, VIC 3000

Dear Mr...or Ms...
If name unknown,
Dear Sir/Madam

Dear Ms Gantner,

I am writing to enquire about the possibility of a short Work Experience placement with your organisation. I am currently midway through a Bachelor of Arts/Economics double degree at La Trobe University, majoring in Development Studies and Business Economics. I have a strong interest in working towards consulting in the area of developing environmentally sustainable business models.

Paragraph 1: Briefly introduce yourself, your current studies, and the reasons why you're looking for work experience

Global Solutions is a company of special interest to me in light of your focus on bringing together multi-disciplinary teams to work on projects that range from pure research & analysis, to practical activities in various countries. I note that you are looking to expand from a purely South East Asian focus to include Pacific nations in the future, which is an area that interests me greatly.

Paragraph 2: Why are you interested in this job in this firm? Show that you have done research into the organisation.

As part of my Development Studies major I undertook a research project on environmental practices in several Pacific island nations, which enabled me to gain an excellent understanding of the opportunities and challenges involved in introducing sustainable practices through the region.

Paragraphs 3 & 4: Here, you sell yourself, letting the employer know how you could meet their needs. Summarise your relevant knowledge, skills and qualities. These claims must be supported by **evidence**.

As a volunteer at the northern Migrant Resource Centre, I have worked with clients in my role of assisting community groups use the facilities at the Centre. These activities have developed my skills in organising and in effectively communicating with people from a broad range of backgrounds. Further, my employment experience in the hospitality sector has enabled me to extend my skills in the areas of customer service, teamwork and problem solving.

Thank you for reviewing my application. Enclosed is a copy of my resume and academic transcripts. I believe that I have the qualities and skills that would be useful at Global Solutions, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss my application in more detail at an interview. I can be reached on 0421 547 842.

Paragraph 5: Thank the employer for considering your application and state that you would be happy to expand on the information at interview

Yours sincerely,

(sign here...)
Simon Ellis

Once You're There....

How to Use Your Work Experience

You will probably find that just the experience of being at a professional workplace for several weeks will be valuable in itself; however if you go with some specific goals, then you should be able to maximise the benefits you gain.

Your course

Through the information you gain from the placement, you might be able to generate possible topics for research projects you have to undertake in the future. Better still, you might additionally be able to shape any future projects you do undertake so that they are more relevant – and potentially usable – to industry.

You may also be better able to plan your subjects – majors, minors and electives – so that they are more in tune with the requirements of the industry.

Network

An important part of your professional development will be your ability to network – to ask questions, make links, share information. Work experience provides you with a valuable opportunity to ask questions, share information, gain insight and develop contacts. Take the opportunity to develop your networking skills – you may set the foundation for some valuable contacts in the future.

Work Experience and your Resume

Get set to take any opportunities at work experience to plug any skill gaps you can see in your resume. For example, if you have lacked the opportunity to undertake any marketing or promotion roles in your study or other employment, involvement in such activities would obviously be useful to add to your resume.

Work Experience and Recruitment

Your work experience could be an additional source to use when you're writing statements to selection criteria, or when you're answering behavioural questions at graduate interviews.