

Work Experience



University of the
Highlands and Islands
Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd
agus nan Eilean

Careers and
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Work Experience

While you are studying you may have the opportunity to undertake work experience – either as part of your course, or set up independently. This advice sheet covers the benefits of work experience, what kinds of work experience there are, and how you can set up work experience.

Work Experience: What are the Benefits?

Gain Employment

While your college or university qualification is useful for gaining employment, for many employers it is not 'enough', they also want to see evidence of work experience in a relevant area. Work experience is particularly essential for very highly sought after jobs, where employers will often select candidates based on how much relevant experience they have. As well as giving you an edge in job applications, work experience can also help you make contacts who may be a good source of jobs in the future.

Develop Skills

The tasks you experience in the workplace are often very different from the tasks you experience in the classroom. Being in the workplace therefore allows you to build up and gain evidence of different skills – for example, customer service skills are often gained primarily from the workplace rather than education.

Put Learning into Practice

If you undertake work experience related to your course, you will often find that your academic knowledge is deepened and extended through your work experience.

Develop Career Ideas

Many people pursue careers they think they will like without ever having actually had experience in these working environments. This is a risky strategy! Work experience gives you first-hand experience of the workplace and can help you discover what kinds of work would *really* suit you. Having an 'insider' perspective on a job will also help you succeed in interviews for similar jobs or workplaces in the future.

Personal Reward

Many people find that doing work experience has a positive impact on them personally – in terms of increasing confidence, increasing social contacts and friendship groups, and (in the case of paid work) bringing in an extra income. For many people the personal value of voluntary work is one of the reasons why they continue with voluntary work throughout their professional lives.



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Kinds of Work Experience

Work Experience

Short periods of work experience (typically one week or two weeks) may be arranged by individual students by making contact with employers speculatively. This kind of experience is often unpaid, and is particularly useful for students who have little experience in the working world, or who want to move into particular working environments e.g. office work, retail work.

Work Shadowing

Work shadowing is also normally arranged speculatively by individual students. Work shadowing is where a student 'shadows' someone doing a job they are interested in, normally just for a couple of days to get an idea of what the work involves. This kind of work experience is normally unpaid and is particularly useful for students who want to get an insight into a particular career or professional role.

Work Placements

On some courses students will have the opportunity to undertake a work placement alongside their studies. Placements may be for a set period each week (e.g. one or two days) or be in the form of a 'block' of weeks normally taken over the course of one semester or during the summer holiday.

Volunteering

Volunteering is a great way to build up work experience. It is particularly useful for people who are interested in environmental, youth, care, social and community work as there are lots of voluntary organisations who work in these sectors. Knowledge and skills in community development, project management and funding may also come from volunteering on committees or boards.

Part Time work

Part time work has the advantage of offering students work experience and a wage at the same time. Part time work is often a very good way to get a first taste of the working world. It is also a good entry route into some sectors such as retail and hospitality where there is a lot of part time work. However, if your interests lie in other occupational areas it is worth considering if you would gain more appropriate skills and experiences through other forms of work experience.

Placements & Internships

A placement or an internship is a short period of work that is offered by a company. Opportunities are often designed with students or graduates in mind, providing a chance to work in a supported way on a structured project for a set amount of time. Placements and internships are commonly offered by companies to fit in with summer vacations (for current students) or as year-long placements for graduates. They may be paid or unpaid.



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Self-Employment

Developing a part time business alongside a course of study is not often considered by students, but may be a useful way of developing entrepreneurial and business skills. This kind of experience may be of particular relevance for students who have a product to sell (e.g. art and design students interested in selling their work) or who have a business idea. Support is often available to help you develop your business ideas – find out more on the ‘self employment’ pages of our website: www.uhi.ac.uk/careers.

Clubs, Societies, & Student Representation

Although not technically ‘work experience’ we have included clubs and societies in this leaflet because being part of a university club or society, being a course or class representative or being part of a community group can still have many of the benefits of other kinds of work experience. So, for example, if you coordinate a conversational Gaelic group or you are the captain of the local football team you will often be developing and displaying useful work-related skills.

Finding Work Experience

Consider your goal

In order to know what kind of work experience would suit you, you need to think about what you want to get out of work experience.

There are three particularly important questions:

- What skills do I want to develop?
- What experience do I want to gain?
- What kind of organisation do I want to work in?

In order to answer these questions it is useful to have an idea of the kind of work you might want to do in the future. If you are not sure what you want to do you may find it useful to look at the ‘explore options’ section of our website: www.uhi.ac.uk/careers.

Once you have an idea of your goals you can then identify what kind of *skills* or *experience* or *organisation* would be useful to target. Sometimes two or more work experience placements are useful in order to make sure you get all the skills, experience, and experience of different organisations that you need. So, for example you might be thinking about becoming a secondary school teacher, but you don’t have any experience working with young people or in a school. Therefore you might decide that you need *skills* in teaching and facilitation and you may want *experience* working with young people – so you might look for experience in a youth-work setting. In addition, you may decide that it would also be useful go into a school to see what the *organisation* is like – so you might enquire about work shadowing a teacher in your local school.



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Identify opportunities

Once you know what you want to get out of work experience, you can look for experience in a similar way to searching for paid work (see the job searching leaflet in this series). Basically you need to:

- **Search for advertised opportunities:**
 - **Jobs, placements and internships:** these opportunities may be advertised on jobs databases and noticeboards. The Careers and Employability Centre has a jobs database where opportunities are advertised for students and graduates. Relevant opportunities are also shared on social media via our Facebook and Twitter feeds. Further sources of job vacancies are given on our 'Job Searching' advice sheet.
 - **Voluntary work:** you can look at: www.volunteerscotland.co.uk for a database of voluntary work and details of local volunteer bureau who can offer advice and support on volunteering.
 - **Clubs, Societies and Student Representation:** Current students can access some opportunities through HISA – the university's Students Association. Local papers are often a good way to find out about groups and clubs within your local community.
- **Use your networks:** work experience is very commonly sourced through a student's own network of contacts. Consider, do you know or know of anyone who works in the area you are interested in? Could you contact them for advice and perhaps some work experience? Further information on creative ways of job-searching by using networks is available in our 'Networking' advice sheet.
- **Make a speculative application:** Many companies are receptive to speculative applications for work experience. To make a speculative application first of all identify potential companies. Then contact them, explaining what kind of work experience you are looking for and why you would like to do some work experience with their company. You can do this by telephone, or by letter or email. Further information on speculative applications can be found in our 'CVs and Covering Letters' advice sheet.

Further Help and Resources

Information on this and other careers and employability topics can be found on the UHI Careers and Employability Centre website: www.uhi.ac.uk/careers. You can also follow the centre on Facebook: www.facebook.com/UHICareers, and on Twitter: twitter.com/UHICareers

You may find our 'Career Planning' 'Job Searching' 'CVs and Covering Letters' and 'Networking' Advice sheets particularly useful. These are available in the 'Resources' section on our website.

Free confidential advice is available to all students on an HNC course or above via telephone, videoconference or email. Contact our advisers by clicking on 'speak to an adviser' on our website. This service is also available to graduates within two years of graduating from an HNC course or higher.