



Gaining Work Experience

Paid Work Experience

Increase your employability prospects through paid vacation work, internships, part-time and casual work while you study. The benefits of working while you are at university are numerous. You get the chance to apply your theoretical skills and gain first-hand experience, build networks and boost your income. Gaining degree-related skills while you study will significantly improve your chances of finding graduate work at the end of your degree. To apply for formal vacation programs, part-time and casual work you need a resume and cover letter tailored to each role.

Vacation Work

In Australia, the term 'vacation work' usually denotes structured vacation placements and not, for example, a casual retail or hospitality holiday job. Vacation work placements are formal programs of paid work, usually in large organisations and normally run from early December to late February. Increasingly, organisations also offer winter vacation work.

The vacation programs usually target penultimate year students (the year before the final year of full-time undergraduate study), and the salary offered is generally based on a percentage of the graduate salary with that organisation.

Employers often run vacation work programs as a way of seeing how well you would perform in and fit with that particular organisation. Performing well can improve your chances of being offered a graduate program role with the same organisation on completion of your degree.

A vacation work program also gives you an idea of what it might be like to work longer term for that organisation and more generally within the industry in which it is based. Whether or not your vacation work program results in future employment with the same organisation, the skills you will have developed in the role are likely to be transferable to a similar position within the industry.

Given the potential learning and employment opportunities of vacation work programs, competition for these places is keen. Applicants will ideally have

a credit average or higher academic record and an active involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Internships

Internships are similar in many ways to vacation work programs, and some employers use the terms interchangeably. Internships, however, may be offered in either vacation or semester time. Some internships are integrated into the curriculum of the degree e.g. Media and Communications in the Arts faculty. These internships are organised by the relevant academic department. Other internships offered by organisations are independent of course requirements and these advertised internships may be open to students from a range of degree and discipline areas. Advertised internships are paid, structured programs offered to penultimate year undergraduate students. Postgraduate students may also be eligible to apply. The recruitment process is highly competitive.

Internships that are independent of course requirements are usually one semester in length and may extend into vacation time. Many programs are flexible and details about start date, end date and days of the week may be negotiated with the employer. Some internships may be for one year.

Generally it's expected that you'll combine work and study commitments, for example two days per week internship and three days per week at university and full-time work during the university vacation period. Obviously you need to be able to manage your study and lecture timetable when you commit to paid work during semester time. Consult your academic adviser or course coordinator if you need guidance in this area.

If your internship is located overseas or interstate and requires a block of time, you may need to defer your studies. You're not obliged to accept an offer of an internship if it interferes with your studies. If you accept the offer of an internship, the employing organisation will expect you to commit to the internship for the duration of the program.

Internship salaries are generally paid as a percentage of graduate salaries.

Part-time and casual work

Even if it's not specifically degree-related, part-time and casual work while you are at university can help you to develop key transferable skills which will place you in a strong position when applying for graduate work. Paid work can be offered on a casual, part-time, permanent or contract basis. Some students are very fortunate and find relevant part-time or casual work within the field or discipline in which they are studying, or in work closely related to their career goals. For example, you may find work as a paralegal, marketing assistant, accounts assistant or in a sales or administrative role relevant to the industry you wish to work in once you graduate. Many jobs in retail, hospitality and customer service are offered on a casual basis.

All part-time and casual jobs are worth including in your resume. You may find that any work you have will develop your transferable skills in areas such as customer service, using computers, office etiquette, supervising staff, business communication and working with minimal supervision. There can be 'flow on' benefits of work to your studies in terms of developing your skills in being organised, managing your time and working in teams with a wide variety of people. Be cautious about accepting more work shifts than you can effectively manage with your study commitments and ensure you don't let your academic results suffer.

A part-time job provides real workplace experience. Taking on a junior or entry level role in an organisation you're interested in can be a very positive step in your career. You will learn new skills which can be taken into other contexts and settings, you will develop a network of contacts and you will gain a great understanding of the industry and the scope of work undertaken by a range of roles.

Casual work provides similar benefits but differs in that you're paid an hourly rate that includes sick and holiday allowances and the work shifts could fluctuate with the demands of the business.

The attitude you display in your job will be important. Demonstrate a willingness to 'get your hands dirty', undertake office tasks such as photocopying and filing with a smile and be open to learning new procedures and systems. Aim to learn as much as you can and make a good impression so that you can request written references and be confident about being given permission to put forward your supervisor as a referee when applying for graduate roles.

Applying for opportunities

Many large organisations advertise vacation work and internship programs. Opportunities are promoted from as early as April each year. You may be required to submit a formal application for any advertised work opportunities. Your application could include a resume, cover letter and statement addressing the selection criteria. Refer to the Job Applications, Identifying Your Employability Skills, Cover Letters, Resume Writing and Addressing Selection Criteria handouts on the Careers Centre's website if you need assistance with your job application documents.

In addition to any advertised programs, you may wish to increase your chances of securing an opportunity by approaching organisations directly to see if they may be willing to offer vacation work, internships, part-time and casual work if no formal program currently exists. This is especially recommended for many of the smaller to medium sized organisations. Your expression of interest could save them recruitment costs. A large percentage of opportunities are never advertised, so it is important that you explore the 'hidden' job market. Ask your own contacts such as family, friends and neighbours if they can recommend any organisations to approach. The Careers Centre handouts Where to Find Jobs and The Job Search Process will help you with this process.

Places where job vacancies are advertised include:

- Careers Centre Jobs Database and career fairs
- Sydney Talent (www.sydneytalent.com.au)
- Your local newspapers and local shopping centre
- Job boards e.g. seek.com.au
- Major newspapers e.g. SMH, The Australian
- Faculty notice boards and emails
- Professional associations
- Websites of any potential employers of interest
- Graduate Opportunities (www.graduateopportunities.com)

Unpaid work

Occasionally, students seek unpaid work in order to develop degree-related skills. You must ensure you are covered for workers compensation and personal accident insurance and you do not enter into an arrangement that is exploitative. Working on a voluntary basis for a registered not-for profit agency will generally include insurance coverage.