

Chapter 10

Back at University

Chapter contents

- 10.1 What makes a placement successful?
- 10.2 If you could do it all again ...
- 10.3 Last words from universities
- 10.4 Take three students
- 10.5 Conclusion

Placements are not just about getting a placement – hard as that might feel at times – nor are they about surviving – thriving – in the placement itself. Your placement is a means to an end: gaining employability skills; learning how to learn in the workplace; and understanding the interaction between university studies and organisational life. Returning to university needs a further adjustment and often right before your final assessment period. One student noted:

It is hard to return to university – in terms of the work day not ending at 5 or 6 pm, but that you should be continuously working, even at weekends, as there is so much to do!! I think this was even more pronounced in the second placement as straight after this we went into the final year when it seems to get much harder!!

So far in this book, we have discussed practical ways to make the most of your placement. In preparing for this, do take the opportunity to speak to as wide a range of people as possible so as to get a better idea of what will be right for you. In this final chapter, we start those wider discussions with fellow students.

10.1 What makes a placement successful?

The short answer is ... you do.

Of course, there is more to it than this. Without a doubt, there are organisations which can be relied upon to offer an excellent placement experience

and others which may offer the wrong roles, or the wrong individual manager to supervise the placement student. Similarly, universities may offer excellent or mediocre support to placement students.

But in the end much of the success of the placement rests with the individual student. For many, this represents a first encounter with really developing important skills for work and learning for the future – managing time effectively, balancing priorities, working with and influencing others, delivering results, and encountering and successfully navigating through problems on the way.

So whilst choosing a 'good' placement organisation helps to improve the chances of success, in the end it is your approach and personal organisation to the placement which will determine how successful it has been.

10.2 If you could do it all again ...

Students interviewed as part of the research for this book were asked what they would have done differently, had they the chance to do it again. Here are their answers!

Top tips from students: what I'd have done differently

Before the placement

Set myself clear objectives beforehand, then strive to achieve them.
Prepared myself for drastic changes in lifestyle compared with university.
Thought more about the type of organisation where I wanted my placement, and where it might lead to.
Sent off more speculative applications.
Prepared better: taken some time to understand the business first.

During the placement

Discuss with your company what you want to get out of the placement.
Got more sleep!
Been more forward with some of my ideas; been more vocal on dull days.
If it starts to go wrong, speak to your manager; don't ignore it, or be underhand.

10.3 Last words from universities

Last words from universities

- There is a placement out there for you – all you have to do is find it and make the most of it.
- Try to see your academic work, your personal development, and your organisation work as 'joined up' topics – too many students look at them as being in separate and disconnected boxes.
- Use this time of your life to gain 'out of the box' experiences.

10.4 Take three students

Student placement experiences vary considerably, but most students who undertake them enjoy them and learn from them. To give you some idea of what to expect, here are their accounts, in their own words, from students who have been through the process already.

As you read these accounts, think about your own placement as well ... what you would have done similarly to these students, and what you may have done differently.

Paul

Paul's placement experience

Decision to take a placement year

- Decided *after* starting university course.
- Aiming for a better degree.

Finding a role

- Placement office.
- Online applications to large organisations – found them slow getting back.
- Smaller, local organisations better at replying.

(Cont'd)

Induction

- Missed the general induction for placement students, but attended general talk, and Health and Safety briefing.

Benefits

- Training and work experience.
- Day trip to Toulouse!
- Working with a wide variety of senior managers.

Regrets

- None, though recognises less freedom.

Key learning points from Paul's placement

- Showed adjustment and resilience in workloads throughout placement – from not enough to do at first, then three separate managers, then given more senior work to do – all important learning opportunities.

Why did you choose to do a work placement?

When I started my course, I hadn't intended to do a placement ... I just wanted to do a three year course. But during my first year, I went to presentations on placements. They showed that you had a much better chance of a better job, and a better degree, if you did a year out. I am pleased with my decision to do a placement.

How did you conduct your job search?

I got my CV ready with help from the placement office, then did a lot of searches on the web, and with the placement office. I also did a lot of on-line applications to large organisations. They could be really bad at getting back to you: it's pretty upsetting at the time, because you spend a lot of time, even with online applications. When you get no response, no feedback, it's hard to know what you are doing wrong.

I also wrote by mail to local organisations, and sent out my CV. They were better at giving a response.

What were the most important factors for you?

I always wanted to go to a larger organisation. Location was also important: I wanted to stay near university if I could, or near home. I didn't want to be away from home and university.

When I came here, I had a very good impression of the organisation through my manager. In another organisation I applied to I knew I would

be doing cold calling to customers to develop sales, and had real ethical problems about the way they worked.

Job title was pretty important, because I wanted a range of different activities.

Money wasn't a huge factor: I really wanted to look at the learning opportunities.

How were you assessed in your applications?

A range of interviews and assessment centres. In one placement I didn't get, I had interviews, did a presentation, and had a group discussion, I don't think I did very well, and hadn't had any practice in these areas. This taught me to be positive all the time in interviews and assessment centres, and to turn all the negatives into positives, by explaining what I had learned from different situations. In group discussions, I learned to listen to what others were saying in the team ... not to jump in too quickly with my own views.

Tell me about your first week in your placement

I missed the main intake week, so I started later with five other interns. The first day was a lot of form filling, health and safety briefings, security passes, that sort of thing. There was also a talk from HR about making the most of the placement. In the first week, I met my colleagues and started work.

How is your work assessed?

It's very informal. I get feedback from my manager, but a lot of the work here is ad hoc. I only have specific objectives from the university.

What training have you received?

I have done Excel training courses on my own initiative, and the company has trained me on SAP.

What difficulties have you encountered?

At the start of my placement, I didn't really have enough to do, and seemed to spend a lot of time twiddling my thumbs. My manager tried to be helpful, but wasn't always there.

Then I had three different managers to report to. Prioritisation was important, but I felt that I had lots of competing demands, and couldn't do anything particularly well. It was stressful, and was resolved by allocating me to work for one manager only.

More recently, quite a few people have left, and I have effectively taken over a full-time role. I have been thrown in at the deep end, and have enjoyed that, but it can be quite hard too, for instance when you go to meetings without feeling that you are fully prepared.

What has given you the most satisfaction?

I have worked with a wide variety of people, and mixed with senior managers, so got to know how they think.

I have had a day trip to Toulouse. Financially, I have more money – I haven't saved anything, but I feel better off, and am no longer in debt.

Any regrets?

Not really. There is a lack of freedom.

How does a placement differ from university?

At university, you can work at any time, it's less structured, and your social life centres on your university friends.

On placements, you have a clear working day, which is both good and bad, but then you know that your work for the day is finished. You certainly have less freedom, and get tired more easily, so earlier to bed! I have learned how to work with people I probably wouldn't have worked with before. I have also learned how to dress properly for work ... and learned how to use an iron!

What about when you get back to university?

I will miss the variety and opportunities this placement have given me. I'll also miss the money. But I feel that I will be more committed to university life and making the most of my final year. I will be more structured and driven.

And now you are actually back at university ... ?

After I finished my placement, I was lucky enough to be invited to work as a subcontractor over the summer. I was also asked to work during my final year at university with the company but the demands of working two to three days a week as well as attending university were just too much.

Adjusting back to the university lifestyle was nice at first with more freedom and a few lay ins! The work schedule for the final year is however a lot more demanding – my year in the workplace has certainly stood me in good stead for this working long hours and managing my work with everything else in my life. I am also currently writing my dissertation and the information and insights I gained within the workplace have been key to my research findings.

I am now looking to apply for graduate schemes and am finding the application forms so much easier to fill in with all of the tasks that I have under my belt from my placement year.

How has your placement influenced your future career plans?

I do not want to be sat at a desk in front of a computer all day. I will want a role where I can meet people. It has given me a clearer impression of what I don't want to do: for example, finance!

Susan**Susan's placement experience****Decision to take a placement year**

- Not sure about career plans – perhaps own business in due course.

Finding a role

- Online.
- Five applications overall, and invited to three assessment centres.

Benefits

- Excellent training, including developing IT and software skills.
- Wide variety of roles and experience.

Regrets

- None about the placement.
- But had been advised to keep a learning journal – didn't do so and now wishes she had.

Where now?

- Still not sure about long-term role, but more confident in tackling degree and finishing well.

Why did you choose to do a work placement?

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left university. One day I might like to have my own business, but in the meantime, I thought that a placement would be good for my CV, and that the experience of working as part of my degree would be really important.

How did you conduct your job search? What were the most important factors for you?

A lot of web searches and using the university websites. I looked both at large and smaller organisations.

The most important factors were job title (I didn't want something too specific); variety of role; and a good organisation name. Then, money was important, though most of the salaries were pretty similar, to be near home or university, and the benefits of the role: I don't mind working hard, but some of my colleagues in placements in other organisations had really long working hours which I wanted to avoid.

How did you apply?

For all my applications, I applied online via the web, or by email with my CV. No post applications. I did five applications overall: I had three assessment centres, and accepted this role before my applications with two other employers had been finished.

How were you assessed in your applications?

For the three places I was shortlisted, I did interviews and assessment centres. The assessment centres included interviews, working in small groups, where we observed, and numeracy tests.

Tell me about your first week

On day one, we had an overall induction day with about 30 internships who started on the same day. On day two, I met the team I was to be working with, then met the rest of the people I was to be working with, and started working in the rest of the week. It was a bit scary at first, but I settled in happily. It will be a wrench to leave at the end of my placement.

How is your work assessed?

At the start of the year, I had my work objectives, personal objectives, and dissertation. My manager regularly helps me to understand my progress. I have a formal review and report mid year, and my placement officer visits to review my progress.

What training have you received?

Induction training, European Computer Driving Licence, SAP for HR and accounting. I also have on-the-job training and coaching. The previous intern had left a checklist for me, which was useful, and I will update that list for my successor.

What difficulties have you encountered?

I started by doing monthly management information returns. At first, the turnaround was three weeks, then two weeks, and now it is one week, so I had a lot of spare capacity once I got used to the work. When I need to find work to do, I speak to my manager. I've done some extra training, but then it gets hard to fill your day when there are only a few weeks left in your internship.

What has given you the most satisfaction?

The work is very varied, which is great. I find that it makes my university work much more relevant, so easier and more interesting to study. I am also lucky to be working in a great team.

Any regrets?

Not about my work, but we were encouraged to keep a learning journal by the university. I meant to start one, but I didn't. I wish I had kept a log of what I had done, and how my placement developed ... what I had achieved.

How does a placement differ from university?

Early starts! Obviously, you also have less freedom during the day, and less time to do other things. I find I am more tired ... in fact I am often shattered. The money is useful, though I don't feel that I am much better off financially.

What top tips would you pass on to other placement students?

Definitely do a placement. It will really boost your confidence and your capabilities.

It's really useful to have a mentor in the organisation ... my manager is also my mentor, and is a great support.

When you are on your placement, your work becomes much more structured – effectively, you are working all the time. I find this structure really useful, and know that I will apply the same routines when I go back to university.

Double check and review your work before you release it; make sure that it is fully correct. My attention to that kind of detail is still improving.

And how is it now that you are back at university?

I have always found my work experience in general a great advantage to my course before my placement, working in a retail shop and a pub restaurant.

My placement year enabled me to apply theory to practise further and to critique readings and theorists as I had a taste of a 'real job' especially as there was a great variety in my job role. I have also been looking for graduate jobs for when I finish my degree and finding my placement year has helped me narrow down my search into what I want to do and that a placement within your degree can help put you ahead of the competition!

How has your placement influenced your future career plans?

I am still not sure yet what I will do, but feel more confident about finishing my degree well, and that I know what I will be looking for in my career choice.

Leanne**Leanne's placement experience*****Decision to take a placement year***

- Had not intended to take a placement year, but attended presentations in first year and became convinced of value in experience, studying, and graduate career opportunities.

Finding a role

- Placement Office a great help.
- Applied to smaller and larger organisations – good success rate in being shortlisted.
- Some very positive job search experiences, and very negative experiences too.

(Cont'd)

Benefits

- Great training opportunities: eRoom training; and two days SAP training and events management training; health and safety training; trained as a recruitment assessor; e-learning media centre access for things like IT skills development.
- More confident with class participation.
- More confident with theory.

Regrets

- Only for a year!
- Don't get quite the same benefits and opportunities as graduate trainees.

Where now?

- Clearer sense of direction, rather than a clear-cut idea. Want to join a graduate trainee scheme for the good learning opportunities.

Key learning points from Leanne's placement

- Making and taking opportunities to undertake further training, develop and network once in a role.

Why did you choose to do a work placement?

I had no intention of doing a placement at the start of my course, but I changed my mind having attended university presentations about placements. I decided to do a placement so that I could put my studies into practice. I thought it would give a real-life application and I could see how things worked in practice. I also thought it would be good to find out more about the work environment, and I enjoy meeting new people and seeing new environments.

How did you conduct your job search?

The university was a great help as the Placements Office provided information on company websites, finding roles to apply for, CV preparation, and interview practice techniques.

I started looking early on in my second year, because I knew that a lot of the big companies filled their jobs early on. Smaller organisations in this area tended to fill their vacancies towards the end of the academic year in the spring and summer. Although I was offered interviews nearly everywhere I applied, I tried to learn from those times when I was rejected or not successful at interview.

What were the most important factors for you?

I wanted a good role, and where I am now sounded really good, and is good. I wanted to stay close to the university if I could, otherwise work in London or a large city.

I wanted a role that was fairly general and offered good opportunities for personal learning and growth.

Salary was less important, but I wanted to know that I would be paid fairly, and have enough to live on.

How did you apply?

For most jobs, I applied online. For smaller companies, I sent a covering letter with my CV; sometimes I telephoned them. Most places I applied to got back to me, but sometimes the time scales were really long, so I didn't always know what was going on.

How were you assessed in your applications?

Here, the selection process was simple and more informal: interviews, and meeting the managers. Elsewhere, there were interviews, presentations, that kind of thing.

Apart from this job, I was offered a job by a large international computer company. At the time, I turned it down because I didn't want to work in the location they had suggested, nor in the role. I explained this to them, and they were very good and suggested alternative roles elsewhere in the company, which impressed me. In another big international computer company, I did interviews, which I thought went well – but I never heard from them again – feedback would have been useful!

Tell me about your first week

The first half day was an induction which introduced the company, informed me about security, finding out where to park my car, then safety and security training. It was OK. I was then sent to find my department on this very large site, which was a bit scary. I then met the team, and the intern I was replacing then looked after me in the first week.

How is your work assessed?

I have a quarterly assessment from my placement office, which is just 'pass' or 'fail'. Here, I get feedback from managers and colleagues about my work. It is also great when they suggest 'Leanne would be good at that'.

For my dissertation, which is my next really big job, it is more difficult to tell how well I am doing at the moment.

What training have you received?

Quite a lot. I have done induction training; eRoom training; and two days SAP training and events management training. I have had health and safety training, and have been trained as a recruitment assessor. I also have access to the company's e-learning media centre for things like IT skills development, and the employee portal.

I have also done Myers-Briggs profiling, which has helped me to understand my personality and how I am likely to relate to others.

What difficulties have you encountered?

The placement has gone well, but I have encountered difficulties when school visits may not have gone so well, for example, when school visitors

are noisy or ill-disciplined when visiting the site. It has taught me to make contingency plans, and to look for ways I can improve things.

What has given you the most satisfaction?

Everything! It has been great for networking, new friends, and new opportunities. I have attended conferences and exhibitions, schools and academies. As a result of my placement experience, I now expect to get a better class of degree.

Any regrets?

Yes, that it is only for a year. I suppose that we don't get quite the same benefits and opportunities as graduate trainees or full-time employees. But, really, there are very few disadvantages.

How does a placement differ from university?

As a student, you need to be much more self-motivated in your work. In a placement, life is much more structured, like getting up at 6 am and having a structured day ahead of you. I don't think there is so much difference financially; you still have to pay the rent, and other bills, though I am in less debt now.

I do also feel loyalty to this organisation, and I am proud to tell people who I work for.

What top tips would you pass on to other placement students?

Start your applications early, and don't give up. Even if you don't get a role by April, there are still jobs and you will get one if you try hard enough.

Make sure that your CV is as well written as it can be. Check your spelling is correct, make sure you give sufficient detail, and don't rush an application, because you can always tell if someone is just trying to justify themselves.

Be proactive in your placement, and volunteer for extra activities if you can.

How has your placement influenced your future career plans?

It has given me a clearer sense of direction, rather than a clear-cut idea. I definitely want to join a graduate trainee scheme as I have seen the good learning opportunities. Longer term, I may look at roles in resourcing or recruitment, or perhaps events management or project management.

Now you are back at university, has anything changed?

Going back to university is definitely different to the previous years. I am much more structured and get up early every day to get on with my work. I find I participate a lot more in seminars due to more confidence and a better understanding of organisations. Having done a placement also helps me reflect on theories and is useful to write about in my coursework. Overall I think I will achieve a better degree classification as a result of my experience.

10.5 Conclusion

Value of placements

As this book was being prepared, we met with a wide range of students, universities, and organisations involved with placements. The road to finding and settling in to a placement was not always easy. But everyone we spoke to reinforced the value they had gained in a placement. For the students, the experience had been beneficial and motivational in a personal growth in confidence, and a renewed vigour and personal organisation for their studies. Organisations had a variety of motivations for offering student placements – as additional support, as a way of developing learning in the organisation, to develop a recruitment pool for graduates, and even for more highly principled reasons such as developing the next generation of entrants with appropriate work skills. And for the universities too, the benefits could be seen in improved academic performance in the final year of studies, and greater employability skills and success.

Selection preparation

The range of possibilities and opportunities to find and benefit from a placement is extensive. Even after the research preparation for this study guide, it is obvious that we can only give a flavour of the types of placement opportunities available. However, a familiar message from many of the universities, organisations, and students and past students interviewed, is one of the value and potential value of placements. Sometimes this potential benefit is lost or diminished because of poor preparation for selection, or a failure to make the most of learning opportunities, or difficulty in coping with organisational processes and politics. By using this study guide effectively, we hope that you will avoid some of these pitfalls, and enjoy and make the most of your own placement experience.

Over to you!

We have finished this study guide with the stories of a small selection of placement students, who have agreed to share their experiences of the successes and occasional challenges of placements. We hope that their stories will help to inspire you, and that this book will also help you to navigate your way to a successful and fulfilling placement experience. Good luck!

(Post Placement) Checklist

- 1 Update your competence example table.
- 2 Ensure that your generic CV is fully up to date and includes new examples of your achievements during your placement.
- 3 Volunteer – to speak to the induction group for the next intake of students in your host organisation, or to potential placement students back at university.
- 4 Register your Continuing Professional Development papers with your future professional body if appropriate.
- 5 If you have a dissertation to finish writing, try to do as much of it as you can before returning to university, and certainly before Christmas of your final year – avoid getting your dissertation workload out of balance and damaging your marks in other subjects.
- 6 Stay in touch with your host organisation(s) – even a Christmas card will keep you on their radar for possible future opportunities, or will help smooth the path for future placement students.
- 7 Approach your studies, and your selection for graduate roles, with renewed energy, application and confidence – you have earned it!