Nearly all employers expect new graduates to have some kind of work experience. It could be in the form of a part-time or summer job, an internship, a placement or volunteering. Any of these could improve your employability.

Work habits

Even modest jobs like bar work or shelf stacking can demonstrate to employers that you have a responsible attitude to work and that you have experienced life beyond academic institutions. Do not underestimate them.

Transferable skills

All work experience teaches you something. It might help you to assess which skills you already have and those you need to develop. Skills that employers value, such as teamwork, flexibility, communication and dealing with pressure can be demonstrated by the jobs you do in your student years.

Testing a career choice

Work experience provides a perfect opportunity to sample a job or an industry area to see if it suits you. Finding out what is not right for you is just as valuable as discovering what is suitable; by the end of your work experience you will be more realistic and informed about future career choices.

Even if you do not yet know what you want to do, you can still learn many things about yourself that will help with career choice. You may discover which sort of activities you value, what sort of working environments are most comfortable for you, how you work in teams and how you respond to colleagues.

Gateway to a career

Large corporate employers now often recruit their graduate trainees from the students who have been on their internship schemes. Some popular specialist professions have fallen into expecting work experience - often unpaid - from applicants; journalism, publishing, museums, psychology are typical examples.

Internships

These are work placement schemes offered by large organisations and companies. They can expose you to experiences that are challenging and demanding. They are commonly found in sectors such as IT, finance, consulting and law. Such internships are often aimed at penultimate year students and are very competitive, so it is vital that you apply early. Most are offered during the summer period but application deadlines start from as early as October of the year before and run through to February.
Unpaid internships

Internships aimed at graduates have been growing in number of late. NGOs have always offered unpaid internships of this kind, but now they can be found in many sectors of the job market. They are controversial because they restrict entry to those who can afford to work unpaid. A key question about these internships is whether they provide a reasonable chance to secure a paid position in the field. The Careers Group refuses to publicise these kinds of internships unless they are offered by a registered charity.

Placements

A placement usually means a period of work experience that is part of a course. Some postgraduate courses have a placement built into the programme. The advantage of this arrangement is that the course will usually provide assistance in finding an employer.

Work shadowing

Sometimes organisations are not able to offer work placements but will allow you to ‘work shadow’ someone. This involves spending time with a professional, watching what their role entails. It may be for one or two days. In order to identify work shadowing possibilities you will need to pinpoint the career area(s) you would like to research and then look for suitable people to shadow.

Volunteering

Usually associated with caring professions and organisations, it can demonstrate the same skills and attributes as any other form of work experience.

Part-time work

Some students ask about fitting work around their course commitments. This is fine for jobs in the service sector. However, they often would prefer the jobs to have a link to their degree. You seldom see part-time jobs for undergraduates in professional areas - laboratory science, legal services, policy, consulting.

How much experience is necessary?

Some students want to know if there is a minimum amount of experience required. But the real issue with any experience is not “How long was it?” but “What did I learn?” Remember that in applications and interviews employers are keen to get you talking about your work experience. What would you have to say about your work history?

International students

You will be able to work in the UK during university vacations and after graduation but with some restrictions. Check with the relevant office within your college for up-to-date information. Alternatively www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk holds information for students looking for jobs in the UK.