

Review of Personal Development and Work Experience Guide

Edited by John Mainstone and Ken Reynolds

Increasing higher education tuition fees, means that more than ever before parents, teachers, advisers and prospective students are asking the question “is a degree worth the investment?”

The answer of course lies with “employability”. This is the new catch phrase for all those undertaking and on the brink of entering a degree course. Within all higher education institutions work is underway to try to get students to see how they can “show and tell” how their degree and what they have learnt can be utilised in the work place. The stakes are high. Some courses will not survive, and students will no longer be prepared to just “worry about getting a job after graduation” having spent an average of £23,000 for the privilege of studying.

It is therefore even more important that students consider doing work experience to confirm what they really enjoy doing and to produce some evidence for both application and future employment. Gaining skills they can demonstrate for application but also that they can utilise after they graduate is key.

“The Personal Development and Work Experience Guide” updated and revised is therefore a welcome breath of fresh air for students, advisers and parents alike. Work experience has always had a maligned place within education. Too often the wrong opportunities were undertaken and were disappointing.

This guide offers to make a real difference. Its purpose is to “develop student’s abilities to help plan a future career” and this doesn’t just mean information provided on “jolly holidays or gap years.” It is a book with a serious function at heart.

It offers a vast range of exciting adventurous opportunities alongside practical taster courses to help you get into vocational degrees. It includes short skills courses to improve key skills. It even offers places to retake your GCSEs or Advanced qualifications if you fail to make the grade. The breadth of content is what makes this guide impressive and so useful.

The book is laid out in a clear and concise style which means that it remains a very slim publication at just 92 pages long. To make life easier it is split carefully into clearly labelled sections.

The introduction outlines the six main key employability skills which gives students a chance to think about their work experience in a practical way. It points out that for vocational courses work experience is a requirement for entry and key skills are recognised in the UCAS tariff. Gaining good quality work experience will help put students at an advantage for entry into university and a chosen career.

The sections are labelled in a purposeful way for example grouping Trekking/Expeditions and Activity Holidays together, then moving on to subject specific work experience. This allows the reader to pick and dip into sections or subject areas most of interest to them. A brief outline of each opportunity is given with the website clearly displayed underneath for further research.

The subject work experience section is not done in many work experience guides and never with the detail seen here. Work experience opportunities are given for vital vocational courses such as Science, Engineering and Medicine, as well as competitive courses such as Business, Sport and Drama and Music amongst others. It gives prospective degree course students, looking to boast their experience for their UCAS application, a gold mine.

Getting into highly competitive vocational courses is not just about grades. For such courses you have to show relevant work experience and the schemes shown here help students to decide if the career and degree course is for them. Attending a four day course to understand what Medicine is about has to be a worth while investment against the length of study and cost of doing such a course overall.

It is a complete book offering important information to accompany any work experience. For longer trips it has a section on funding which are required by many of the more adventurous opportunities. You can trek round Asia or Africa or even spend time in the Sinai desert and this book will tell you about how to find funding for these lifestyle options.

There is a very useful addition on managing risk which every parent as well as young person should read for example; what to look for in reputable organisations, what preparation do they have for crises, are they insured, and what is their provision for in-country medical care. It asks the questions you won't have thought of and there is a handy check list provided to tick against to make sure all is covered. There is also a finding focus section which allows students to write their own plan including how they will benefit from the experience and what they (rather than mum or dad) need to arrange.

Taster courses are given towards the end of the book and a list of summer schools, campus days and open days at Universities across the UK right across subject areas. There is further recommended reading. Unusually, there is also a geographical index alongside the more traditional index, which if the reader has a country in mind they can cross reference to an opportunity.

This book fills a void in an area which is often the dread of parents, advisers, and teachers. Where can students find purposeful work experience that can really enlighten, educate and excite? As the title suggests this book offers personal development through opportunities and isn't just another gap year or work experience guide. It offers the complete package, to increase any student's life chances. No student should leave home without it.

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Personal Development and Work Experience Guide 2010/11 is edited by John Mainstone and Ken Reynolds.

Published and available from Cambridge Occupational Analysts Ltd.

ISBN: 978-1-906711-07-8