Graduate Head Start
Organising your own Placement
Handbook
What is a ‘Suitable’ Placement?

A placement should be considered that will give you a valuable employment experience and that will allow you to develop skills that will further your career ambitions. Remember that as well as the short-term goal of the module assessment, your placement is also an ideal opportunity to try out a particular career area or organisation type.
University or own-arranged placements?

Both of these types of placements can be extremely rewarding; one type may be more appropriate depending on your needs, career ambitions and existing commitments. The following list summarises their characteristics:

University arranged placements

- Placements will be within the North West area.
- Graduates need to be flexible regarding the type of placement.
- Initial negotiation will be undertaken by your Placement Co-ordinator.
- Suitability of the placement will be assessed by your Placement Co-ordinator.

Own-arranged placements

- These placements will be relevant for Graduates living outside the North West area.
- Are suitable for Graduates who are looking for a specialised placement e.g. fashion magazines, international banking.
- Are suitable for Graduates who may already have established contacts in a business or are already employed on a full or part time basis.
- Are suitable for those interested in organisations who prefer direct contact e.g. media placements.
Things to consider prior to organising your placement

Do you have:
- A full time or part time job? Could your placement or portfolio be carried out in addition to your other work commitments or be based around your current employment? Your Tutor or Placement Co-ordinator will be able to advise you on the best solution.
- Family commitments?
- Transport?

Once you have considered the above you need to decide:
- What type of organisation you would like to conduct your placement in.
- Where this type of placement opportunity is available, e.g. Chester, Birmingham, London etc.

Above all, talk to people!
If you are uncertain as to the most suitable type of placement for you, talk with your Placement Co-ordinator, the Careers & Employability department, a Tutor, friends and family etc. Be prepared to be flexible, keep an open mind and investigate all options!
Own-arranged placements

If you want your placement to be outside the North West area and you know what type of placement you want, you already have contacts in an organisation, you are looking for a specialised placement or it’s an organisation that is keen on direct contact from candidates (e.g. media, PR), then arranging your own placement is for you. Your Placement Coordinator can offer advice on this, so please discuss your requirements with them.

Your full time or part time work may provide a rewarding placement, but you will need to check with your Tutor that the work you undertake will be appropriate to base your portfolio on. You might want to consider negotiating a particular project with your current employer.

How to go about organising your own placement

Research
This stage is vital to arranging a successful placement. Think about the type of placement you would ideally like. You can speak to a Placement Coordinator to discuss placement types and the applications process or to the Careers & Employability department for advice about future career areas.

Identify potential companies who may be able to offer the type of placement you are interested in. The best way to do this is by using online resources (business listings, industrial and retail park websites, specific companies etc.) and printed material e.g. Yellow Pages. Discuss your ideas with family and friends to see if they have any relevant contacts.

First Contact
Once you are in a position to start contacting potential placement providers, make your initial contact by telephone. The purpose of this call is to establish the name of the person in the company with whom you need to negotiate your placement.
This could be the head of the department in which you want to work, the person responsible for graduate placements or the HR department. It is probably best to start with the head of the department as that person will be aware of the projects that could be available. In some organisations you will need to negotiate with a Graduate Co-ordinator or the HR department.

**Making the First Call**

The purpose of this call is to establish who you need to speak to and to obtain an email address and direct telephone number. It is important to bear this goal in mind when making your initial call, you are not trying to speak to that individual at this stage.

Phone conversations can be tricky; we don’t have the visual cues of body language to go on and you can lose track of the purpose of the conversation. Whilst you don’t want an entirely scripted conversation, it would be useful to write yourself a crib sheet to act as your prompts to ensure that you’ve covered all aspects of etiquette and the relevant questions. Some of the things to consider include:

- Be ready to introduce yourself and to explain briefly the purpose of your call.
- Ask for the name and position of the most appropriate person to contact about placements. You can then address your application email/letter personally and you will know who to follow up with.

You may be passed directly through to the individual concerned. If so:

- Have ready the answer to the question — “Why should we take you on a work placement?” You will need to convince the organisation that they have something to gain from taking you on.
- Be enthusiastic!
The Follow-Up

Follow-up your telephone contact with a letter/email explaining your placement requirements and with your CV.

Speak to the Careers & Employability department about writing your covering letter/email and make sure that you have had your CV reviewed. There is a Careers & Employability Guide to ‘Writing a Graduate CV and Covering Letter’ available on the University of Chester website (www.chester.ac.uk/careers) to download.

Be positive and professional in all your communications with potential placement providers. An informal, chatty style may be appropriate once you’ve found your feet in an organisation, but before you know their day-to-day style and approach the advice is play it safe. Maintain this approach even when using more typically informal media such as email, avoiding abbreviations and text speak.

Remember it is much more flattering to the company if you tell them that you are looking forward to the opportunity of undertaking a 5-week placement as part of your studies, NOT that you HAVE to undertake a placement because it is part of your course and that you wanted to work with them because “you’re just round the corner from my house”.

Making the Second Call

The purpose of this call is to arrange a meeting with your potential placement provider. Following your application email/letter you should contact the person you have identified as responsible for placement offers directly. If you have sent an email allow at least one day for the email to be digested. If you have sent a letter, allow time for the letter to arrive and to be read. However the time to make the call is when the letter/email is still fresh in your potential placement provider’s memory.
For many, making a telephone call to a prospective placement provider is a very daunting prospect, so here are some tips that may make it easier for you when talking to organisations on the phone:

- Know what you are going to say before you make the call by preparing a list of the main points you want to make.
- Be prepared for different responses, including negative replies, and plan your answers.
- Practise before you make your calls.
- Keep a copy of your CV by the phone when you make your calls, it will help you think of your skills and positive attributes.
- Start by calling the organisation you are least interested in. Your telephone techniques will get better with practice, so polish your skills before you call your best placement prospects. Modify your technique if you are not getting the results you expect, keep trying!
- Be courteous and sensitive to the person on the other end. Introduce yourself and speak in a pleasant, understandable manner. If the person you are talking to sounds rushed, ask if there is a time you can call back that is more convenient. Be sure to follow up the call!
- Sound confident and professional - use language that demonstrates your enthusiasm and abilities and avoid using slang as this gives a bad impression.
- Keep background noise to a minimum. Radios, televisions, barking dogs and crying children are distracting to the person you are speaking to and yourself.
- Be prepared to take notes (names and addresses etc), have a paper and pen handy.
- Always speak clearly so that you can be easily understood.
- Schedule calls for a certain time of day - don’t procrastinate.
- Be prepared for rejections and don’t take them personally, they just bring you one step closer to a YES!
- Be clear about your goal during your call and stick to it.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for a meeting to discuss potential projects you could work on, if this is appropriate.
- If this person can’t help you, make sure that you ask if they have a contact internally or externally to their organisation who may be able to help. Ask for their details and make sure you get in touch.
Firstly, you should introduce yourself as a postgraduate student at the University of Chester. You should advise that your call is in reference to your letter/email. Some ideas of how to start the conversation are:

“Hello. My name is (your name). I am currently studying (subject name) at the University of Chester and would like to speak to ........”

“What is the call in relation to”? 

“I recently sent a letter/email regarding a postgraduate student project”

Obtaining an Interview

Once you have obtained an interview, you have done the hard part! The initial arrangements to set this up are the trickiest part. Although your interview with the placement provider may be a very informal meeting, you should treat it just like a job interview. Make sure that you are dressed in a suit or equivalent workwear.

It is essential that you have conducted research into the organisation and the department within that organisation. You will need to have a clear idea about what you want to gain from a placement and what skills and expertise you can offer.

The purpose of this meeting is to obtain a firm placement offer, to agree a job description and to ask questions to make sure that this is the right organisation for your 5-week placement.

Your placement has to be right for you, so don’t be afraid to negotiate your duties with your potential host. Placements always work better when you have a clear goal, that’s one of the reasons why it is necessary to negotiate your project description.
Creating a Job Description

Your project or role description will form the basis of your Learning Agreement that you will draw up during the taught sessions. You need to be clear about what you are going to do in your placement and a job description should be negotiated between you and your placement provider, even though it may be provisional.

The Job Description

- Clarifies what you will be doing during the placement for both you and your placement provider.

- Ensures both parties understand each other’s expectations of the placement.

- Sets a framework so that you can identify potential areas for learning and, with the assistance of your Tutor, translates into a Learning Agreement.

- Should be negotiated between you and the organisation and should be signed by both parties.

- Must be completed prior to the commencement of the placement.

Writing a Job Description

You need to discuss with your placement provider:

- The projects, tasks and activities you will be engaged in.

- The qualities and skills your placement provider is looking for in you e.g. the ability to work in a team, the ability to work independently, skills required etc.

When discussing your job description with a prospective placement provider, it may also be useful to explain the nature of the course and to indicate what you need from the placement. It might be useful to think about the sort of targets you might set yourself and how you might plan to achieve them. You will need to discuss your targets and action plan with your placement provider more fully at the start of the placement and ask him/her to sign to approve the plan.
Placements Involving Defined Projects and Set Tasks

Ensure that you specify the set project(s) or tasks that you will be undertaking. Where the nature of the work is less prescriptive or it is difficult to determine exactly what will be involved until you are in the placement, indicate the areas of work you have discussed with your placement provider and/or those that you are likely to be involved in.

Observation Placements

There are occasions where learning is achieved through observation, although it is preferable that most of your learning occurs by “doing.” Observation should be a minor part of the learning experience, but may be built into the job description if needed. If you require any assistance to complete the job description, your Placement Co-ordinator will be able to offer advice.

Once Your Placement is Confirmed

Once you have negotiated your placement you must complete an Own-Arranged Placement Approval Form which can be obtained through the Graduate Head Start team. This form must then be completed and handed in to the Graduate Head Start team prior to the start of your placement. This enables us to get in contact with the company, ensuring they have the necessary Health and Safety policies and procedures in place. It is essential that you do not start an unapproved placement.

To obtain an Own-Arranged Placement Approval Form please contact:

Jaime Cox
Placement Co-ordinator
Graduate Head Start Programme

Telephone 01244 511864
Email j.cox@chester.ac.uk
We are happy to provide the information in this booklet in alternative formats upon request.