Lessons in real-life work

Practical experience can help students find jobs, writes Alice Waslev

The notion that university students exist in a world isolated from the realities of the workplace is something of a myth.

Many courses incorporate a practical placement as part of the curriculum.

Director of graduate recruitment specialists Gradient, Nat Cagilaba, says more employers want graduates with on-the-job experience.

"Employers are looking for people who are practical and can hit the ground running, especially in the current climate," he says.

"If they've had retrenchments and had to let people go — when you're bringing people on they have to be effective quicker.

"I think having that practical element, either through the course or through internships, or practical assignments for a year, makes students business-ready. If anything, it's probably going to elevate their chances."

Degrees in the medical field, such as medicine, nursing, occupational therapy and physiotherapy, have always had a practical element but most degrees incorporate some sort of field training.

For example, students studying for a degree in social work at the University of Sydney are expected to spend at least 140 seven-hour working days (at least 980 hours) in a minimum of two field placements.

Social work student Jerome Chong, 21, of Hornsby Heights, says that while going out into the workplace was scary at first, the experience was very rewarding.

Chong, who is going into his fourth year at the University of Sydney, last year spent most of semester two of his degree doing practical experience at the Wayside Chapel, working primarily with the homeless.

"When you're reading and writing about this stuff in class it's not boring but it's kind of like reading a book for two years about how to ride a bike," he says. "Honestly, you have no idea [when you start]. On my first day I was trying to remember my notes and stuff but you know nothing until you actually speak to someone. And you kind of learn more every day. It's a vital part [of learning]."

Cagilaba agrees that practical experience can help steer students in the right direction.

"I see it as a positive only because it does make a graduate more aware of what's right for them, rather than going into an organisation with rose-tinted glasses and suddenly finding out this isn't right for me," he says.

In such a competitive job market, Cagilaba says that in some cases doing an internship is the only way to get a job.

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"There are certain organisations in the financial services industries where they don't have a graduate recruitment program because their feeling is if they haven't [already] identified their high potential and they haven't actually worked with them through internships then they won't be interested in them at the final stage," he says.

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