

Vacation experience checklist

This article aims to provide you with what you need to know about how to get yourself a vacation placement and how to make the most of it, with advice gathered from recruitment managers, teacher practitioners and university careers advisers

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It is summer, the exams are over and up to four months stretch ahead of you before you are back at university. It may be nice to think about spending the vacation chilling out and generally lazing around, but in reality no pharmacy student can either afford to or would want to do that. You owe yourself a break from studying, but at the same time you know that you need to use at least part of the long vacation to further your pharmacy education in a practical way, and to get a taste of the career possibilities that await you once you are qualified. With existing schools of pharmacy increasing their intakes and new schools opening up, the competition for vacation experience places is hotting up.

Why get vocational experience?

- ▶ To get a flavour of what working in the various sectors of pharmacy is like, in order to help you decide on your career path once qualified. Even if you have definitely decided on your future career, you should try to get experience in both community and hospital before you graduate.
- ▶ To add credibility to your CV for preregistration applications; employers generally like applicants who have experienced more than one sector or company in the profession.

- ▶ To earn some money to help you through the next academic year.

What is available?

- ▶ Community pharmacy, with multiple and independent companies.
- ▶ Hospital pharmacy.
- ▶ Industrial pharmacy. A few places are available; these may be advertised or you might be rewarded for showing initiative by approaching companies directly and asking if they have a place for you.
- ▶ Academic pharmacy. Schools of pharmacy offer a few places per year for students to work on research projects during the summer. A good move if you are thinking of a career in research.

What kind of experience is available?

- ▶ Most community pharmacy companies, including smaller multiples, offer structured programmes. Some companies have fixed-term programmes of usually six or eight consecutive weeks, others are more flexible and offer two-week blocks, which can be spread over the summer with breaks between. Programmes are competency-based and may include modules from the

companies' health care assistant training schemes. Your progress is normally monitored and appraised regularly by a pharmacist in the store appointed as your tutor. In independent pharmacies the experience may be more informal and more "learning by doing", but can offer as rich an experience as a more structured programme.

- ▶ In hospitals the structure and content of programmes can vary between regions or individual trusts since there is no national vacation training scheme, but you will usually get a taste of most aspects of a hospital pharmacy's activities.

How do you find out what is available?

- ▶ Community. Teacher practitioners in your university will inform you about their own companies' schemes via the careers notice-board and e-mail, and make application forms available. Some companies give presentations about their vacation schemes. Others may send posters for the careers notice-board plus supplies of application forms for distribution by the careers tutor. You could also be proactive and get application forms via companies' websites or recruitment telephone hotlines. For

independent pharmacies, go in and speak to the owner or pharmacist in charge.

- ▶ Hospitals. Some regions or individual trusts may advertise as above, but there is no national scheme. Ask the hospital teacher practitioners in your school for more information, or apply direct to hospitals where you would like to work through the chief pharmacist.
- ▶ Opportunities in the pharmaceutical industry are occasionally advertised through careers notice-boards, etc.
- ▶ Summer research studentships are advertised within individual schools of pharmacy.

How do you get a placement?

- ▶ Nearly all placements, in both hospital and community, are offered on the basis of the application form alone, so it is vital that you make yours count — follow the tips in Panel 1. Forms are available during the autumn semester, and companies' closing dates vary from December to the end of January. Hospital deadlines may be slightly later.
- ▶ Occasionally interviews may be held, especially where competition for places is high. If you get an interview make sure you are properly prepared; teacher practitioners or your personal

Panel 1: The successful application form checklist

- ▶ Fill it out in good time, do not leave it until the last minute. All employers operate strictly to their closing date, if you miss it your application will not be considered.
- ▶ Make several photocopies of the form to practise on.
- ▶ Do your research, find out as much as you can about the company or hospital you are applying to.
- ▶ Follow the instructions on the form accurately. Some employers provide guidance notes, use them.
- ▶ Fill out the form legibly and neatly.
- ▶ Get your spelling and grammar correct.
- ▶ Most questions about experience are competency based, asking you to show how you have demonstrated a particular quality or skill in an actual situation. Use as wide a range of examples as possible; ensure that they demonstrate the skill or quality asked about in the question. If describing your work in a team, describe your own role in it.

tutor may be prepared to help you with advice, or consult your university careers advice service.

- ▶ Maximise your chances by avoiding applying to the most popular places. These include pharmacies in large city centres or near schools of pharmacy, and teaching hospitals. Experience elsewhere will be just as valuable.
- ▶ Be flexible about where you work. Employers will try to place you near where you live or are spending the summer if they can, but give an alternative venue in case you do not get your first choice.

Why and how you should impress in your placement

- ▶ A summer placement can be a way in to a preregistration place in an increasingly competitive market. All employers will make assessments of your progress and keep them on file. Making a good impression can be a

vacation experience

pay your own travelling costs. Full details of the scheme are available from the British Pharmaceutical Students Association.

The “take home message”

- ▶ Competition is getting tougher all the time, so extra time and effort put into researching placements and getting the application right is worthwhile.
- ▶ Do not be upset or discouraged if you cannot get a pharmacy placement for all three years. Make the most of your placement in terms of your own career and professional development.
- ▶ Whatever you do, do not fritter away the summer doing nothing. ☹

big step to being offered a training place.

- ▶ What you learn can reinforce your academic knowledge from your MPharm course and make you better prepared for exams, etc, especially in the clinical and pharmacy practice areas.
- ▶ Be prepared to work hard. Show a cheerful attitude to fellow workers, superiors and clients. Accept tasks and learn willingly. Show that you can work as part of a team. Show that you are interested in developing yourself professionally, and can assess your own learning needs. Be proactive and show initiative; make suggestions if you see things that you think can be improved. Finally, pay attention to the mundane, but important things such as your attendance record, punctuality and appearance, since these will all be noted for possible future reference.
- ▶ Make the experience valuable to yourself — the more you put into it the more you will get out of it.

What if you cannot get a vacation placement

- ▶ Competition for places is high: there are up to eight applications per place in community, and one teaching hospital trust in London reported 250

applications for 12 vacation places in 2003, so not every student can be guaranteed a placement every year. But if you cannot get a pharmacy placement do not despair, you can still get valuable and relevant experience elsewhere that looks good on your CV. Opportunities outside pharmacy are listed in Panel 2.

- ▶ Enlist the help of your university careers advisers, they have the know-how to help you find work outside of pharmacy.
- ▶ If you cannot find paid employment in a pharmacy try to get work shadowing experience. Some hospitals that cannot afford to pay for summer students may be prepared to let you shadow staff and work in the pharmacy department for a week or two. Community pharmacies may also let you do some work shadowing, although attachments are usually shorter. For these opportunities you should apply directly to the hospital chief pharmacist or store manager.
- ▶ The International Pharmacy Students Federation arranges exchange placements in pharmacies abroad, usually for a month. Board and lodging is usually supplied free-of-charge and you may get a little spending money, although not a proper salary. You should expect to

Panel 2: Work experience opportunities outside pharmacy

- ▶ Work in retail businesses provides training in many of the transferable skills used in pharmacy, including retailing systems and management, teamwork and communication skills.
- ▶ Office-based “temping” jobs, usually obtained via employment agencies. Again, useful skills can be acquired.
- ▶ Temporary work through specialist employment agencies, eg, in laboratories, or foreign language work for bilingual students.
- ▶ Work on special projects, eg, wildlife, environmental conservation.
- ▶ Voluntary work for charities; unpaid, but valuable experience and worthwhile.
- ▶ Vacation internships. Usually eight-week placements, often project based, offered by large companies such as high street banks, large retailers (eg, Marks and Spencers, John Lewis, etc) accountancy and law firms. These are advertised through university careers services.
- ▶ Ask your university careers service about what else might be available.